YUKI YAKU

Illustration by
Fly

Lv.6

Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki

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"I'll give you a bite of mine, too."

"On the Wings of the Unknown"

"Hey, look, you grew antennae!"
受付
Reception
"Nope! They're my cute bunny ears. ♥"

Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki, Level 6

CONTENTS

1 Everyone has different expectations about a big event

2 Even fetch quests raise your level

3 Important items are usually lying around in enchanted forests

4 Sometimes the main character can't enter the village of another species on his own

5 If you don't make up your mind, the story won't advance

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Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki Lv.6

Yuki Yaku

Illustration by Fly

YEN ON
New York

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Cover art by Fly
Translation by Winifred Bird

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by Yuki YAKU
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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Characters

Common Honorifics

1: Everyone has different expectations about a big event

2: Even fetch quests raise your level

3: Important items are usually lying around in enchanted forests

4: Sometimes the main character can’t enter the village of another species on his own

5: If you don’t make up your mind, the story won’t advance

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Bottom-Tier CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Lv.6

Characters

Fumiya Tomozaki
Second-year high school student. Bottom-tier.

Aoi Hinami
Second-year high school student. Perfect heroine of the school.

Minami Nanami
Second-year high school student. Class clown.

Hanabi Natsubayashi
Second-year high school student. Small.

Yuzu Izumi
Second-year high school student. Hot.

Fuka Kikuchi
Second-year high school student. Bookworm.

Takahiro Mizusawa
Second-year high school student. Wants to be a beautician.

Shuji Nakamura
Second-year high school student. Class boss.

Takei
Second-year high school student. Built.

Tsugumi Narita
First-year high school student. Easygoing.

Erika Konno
Second-year high school student. Queen of the class.

Common Honorifics

In order to preserve the authenticity of the Japanese setting of this book, we have chosen to retain the honorifics used in the original language to express the relationships between characters.

No honorific: Indicates familiarity or closeness; if used without permission or reason, addressing someone in this manner would constitute an insult.

-*san*: The Japanese equivalent of Mr./Mrs./Miss. If a situation calls for politeness, this is the fail-safe honorific.

-*kun*: Used most often when referring to boys, this indicates affection or familiarity. Occasionally used by older men among their peers, but it may also be used by anyone referring to a person of lower standing.

-*chan*: An affectionate honorific indicating familiarity used mostly in reference to girls; also used in reference to cute persons or animals of either gender.

-*senpai*: An honorific indicating respect for a senior member of an organization. Often used by younger students with their upperclassmen at school.

-*sensei*: An honorific indicating respect for a master of some field of study. Perhaps most commonly known as the form of address for teachers in school.

1

Everyone has different expectations about a big event

It was a Monday night, and two ninjas were racing around the screen of the little CRT TV in my room.

"She's been at it again…," I muttered.

I tightened my grip on the controller, and my slightly sweaty palms were making the buttons damp.

Both of the ninjas were Founds. One was being controlled by me. The other was being controlled by NO NAME, the second-best *Atafami* player in Japan—Aoi Hinami.

That's right—for the first time in ages, Hinami and I were facing off in a first-to-five online match.

"Ooooh, nice."

Hinami's Found slid back and forth over the ground without pausing, occasionally making short hops. She was wavedashing, sliding over the ground with no lag while keeping just the right distance from me. Whenever she jumped, she used a forward-air attack to keep me from taking the advantage, delicately maneuvering and gathering information about my strategy to keep herself safe.

Some people take risks to avoid responsibility or use "intuition" because they don't want to think. But her precise maneuvering was nothing like that—instead, I could see the results of all her obsessive, step-by-step trial and error and a stunning amount of steady effort.

It'd been around a couple of weeks since I'd played her. During that time, she'd definitely leveled up her ability to read the situation and move neatly and efficiently. It was like she'd kept the machinelike accuracy of her playstyle but ramped up the computing power.

I could see her in my mind's eye, her face composed and her fingers flying precisely over the controller.

"…Which means…"

Something occurred to me.

If she was going to play the whole game based on accurate predictions and the most productive and rewarding moves…

…what would happen if I exclusively targeted the moves she was banking on?

It would be a metagame specially tailored to the devotee of efficiency, a method for dealing with Aoi Hinami similar to the one I'd used during the student council election.

Then maybe we'd find ourselves in a totally new kind of battle.

An instant later, I jammed my thumb against the joystick.

Thanks to Found's quick run speed, I managed to slip past NO NAME's midair swipe, but instead of stopping there, I continued past her by a couple of character lengths. Basically, I ran close to her and then put space between us again on the opposite side. The end result was that we were about the same distance apart as before, but since my back was to her now, you could maybe say I was at a slight disadvantage.

But that was the whole point.

When she was controlling Found, Hinami was basically incapable of responding to pointless, risky moves, so her attack was aimed in the opposite direction from where I was now. When I ran in close for basically no reason, the move with the best projected outcome was to take advantage of the opening. She ended up missing me, but since I'd just kept going on the other side, the ending lag was small and not much of a minus for her. Add in the fact that I'd shown her my back, and we were just about even.

In other words, our relative advantages and disadvantages had barely changed at all.

And again, that was the point.

In this moment, only one thing was different from before. We would both need to reconsider our strategies now.

During the brief instant when Hinami was thinking, I jammed the joystick again and jumped high in the air, my back still to her. Then I nudged the joystick toward her and, after it returned to a neutral position, hit B. It's a little technique for reversing directions in midair while getting a projectile ready. My Found was now facing Hinami with a throwing star in his hand.

A second later, Hinami's Found was in precisely the right spot to be hit by the star if I threw it down at a slant.

"Yesss."

Just what I was aiming for.

But my goal wasn't to hit her with the star right then.

First of all, Hinami's Found was able to move freely right now while giving me almost no chance to land an attack. On top of that, I'd let her see me getting the star ready, so if I threw it right then, the chances of it hitting her were low.

If she'd figured out what I was going to do with the star, she could guard, she could spot dodge or wavedash to avoid it, or she could rush me, taking advantage of the lag from charging the weapon, and intercept me before I even released it.

If I was expecting her to guard, I could cancel the charge and fast fall to the ground, shorten the landing lag with an L-cancel, then get in a dash grab. Or if I thought she would interrupt me, I could throw the star early, stopping her as she flew toward me. I could even cancel the midair charge, then land and wavedash away from Hinami. She would probably attack to take advantage of my landing lag, but this way, I could dodge and then hit back.

Yeah, the possibilities at this point were limitless.

And those limitless possibilities?

They were the reason I'd made such a high-risk move.

Hinami was like a computer, calculating several moves ahead. That was her specialty, and her ability to combine it with precision moves was her greatest strength.

That's why I'd reset all her predictions and calculations with this. If I created a "flat" situation where there were no advantages, disadvantages, or predictions on either side, all the patterns she'd mentally played out would be reset as well.

Now our battle and our choices would be based on our reflexes and power of imagination—a true battle of player skills. A fight based purely on innate ability.

I focused all my nerves, all my attention on each piece of visual information that came at me from the TV screen.

"…What's gonna go down?"

Hinami, NO NAME, Found.

The timing, the range of her attack, the shape of the stage.

Experience, expectations, passion.

I mixed it all up and channeled it into my fingertips.

Everything beyond the screen disappeared from my field of vision and my mind. It was a paradox, where every action happened in both high speed and searing clarity, whirling through my brain and making my whole body feel light. My thoughts seemed to be moving just a tiny bit faster than the electrical signals, linking logic and goals. It's like I can feel the information carrying me to my objective.

I get like that a lot when I play *Atafami*, and I almost never lose when I'm in that state.

For some reason, it happens during almost every game I play against Hinami. Even when I play ad hoc matches against high-level opponents, my winrate is only 70 or 80 percent, but I've never lost to Hinami yet. I think that has as much to do with this hyper state as it does with the fact that she uses the same character as me and her playstyle is based on mine.

With my accelerated synapses, I honed in on the intentions and sensations I was able to pick up from her Found—and the moves NO NAME could make in this explosive match.

At this distance, I should be able to watch what she did, think up a strategy based on that, and accurately implement it.

Then Hinami's Found—made a strange choice.

"…Huh?"

Confused, I landed with the charged throwing star in my hand. The next instant, I released it.

It hit her full-on.

While I was way out of range, Hinami's Found took the hit and flinched.

"What the…?"

She didn't guard, dodge, or intercept. She just dashed in a straight line away from me, widening the space between us.

With her back to me, she was obviously undefended against my throwing star.

In other words, with almost no risk, I was able to inflict more than 10 percent damage on her.

Caught off guard, I snapped back to reality and thought about the situation.

"…Oh." I finally figured it out. "Is she really that unshakable?"

I curled my lips in a smile of some chagrin.

This is what I guessed her calculation was.

A second ago, everything was reset to zero. We had the same

chance of benefiting from that clean slate.

It was a high-risk, high-return moment for both of us. We were both in range, but there were no standard strats to take from here.

There was a chance I'd snatch a victory then and there, but also a chance that Hinami would win with her typical precision.

In terms of the game's final outcome, it was a weighty moment that would bring big wins and losses.

And this is what I'm guessing Hinami was thinking right then.

If I'm going to be sucked into a big gamble where I can't calculate the outcome, then I'd rather take a sure hit now.

That was NO NAME's unshakable stance. She was committed to making calculated decisions.

I couldn't help enjoying this.

If she'd taken the gamble, then there was a chance she would have lost. But there was an equal chance she would have won.

The situation favored neither of us. The odds were even, you might say.

On the other hand, when she dashed away from me and left herself open to a hit, she had no chance of a gain and an almost certain chance of taking 10 percent damage.

So between a fifty-fifty gamble and a certain 10 percent loss, Hinami chose the latter.

She was so bent on avoiding unknown risks that she was willing to accept a definite disadvantage.

That was Hinami's playstyle in a nutshell.

She charged her opponents head-on, based on her own precise calculations of success, and she had total confidence in those calculations. So when she couldn't rely on them—she would never make a move.

"Huh…"

People like her were what made *Atafami* so much fun.

I took a deep breath and adjusted my grip on the controller. My brain loves these close fights, trading razor-thin advantages back and forth with my opponent.

But from that point on, Hinami steadily built her advantage back up, and after losing four stocks to me, she won with one stock left.

It was the first time she'd beat me in a one-on-one match.

Her victory had nothing to do with me losing my focus or anything like that. It was the result of pure skill and determination to stay true to her playstyle.

Still, what mattered in *Atafami* was your winrate, so she hadn't caught up to me or anything. I still beat her more than 90 percent of the time.

As I gazed at the endgame results screen, a chat message from Hinami suddenly popped up.

[*I win.*]

Honestly, what is with her? She already won for the first time, but did she really have to rub it in? I don't even know how many times we'd played since agreeing to meet IRL that first time, but never once had she sent me a message that wasn't pure business. Man, she really hated to lose.

"…Shit." I frowned, imagining her proudly victorious face.

Well, I guess her first win against me did deserve some celebration. I always pummeled her in *Atafami*, so it wouldn't kill me to be an adult and give her some praise for once.

I started typing into the chat box.

[*You still need five to win. I'm beating you four to one. Too bad.*]

I won the next game, which meant that after some time away from the game, our first-to-five face-off ended with five wins and one loss for me. *Sorry, but I'm a sore loser, too.*

* * *

The next day was Tuesday, and for the first time in quite a while, I found myself in Sewing Room #2.

Hinami and I had stopped meeting in this room until the situation with Konno and Tama-chan blew over, but after school on Monday, Hinami announced she was ready to start up again.

As I sat down in a chair in the middle of the room and put my bag down on the desk, I heard that familiar voice, biting and clear

as a wind chime.

"So."

I looked up. Hinami was sitting with her legs crossed, giving me a look that was both sexy and weirdly intimidating at the same time. As usual, there was no vulnerability around her at all. Her silky hair fell straight down, the ends swaying seductively like a cat toy at the slightest movement of her head.

"I'd like to start out by going over some facts."

I redirected my attention from her hair back to her face, meeting her eyes.

"…Facts?"

Hinami gave a tiny nod, and there was something almost severe in her expression. "I'm talking about Hanabi. I was pretty busy when all that was playing out, and I think you were as well."

"Oh, uh-huh." I nodded. Of course that's what she wanted to talk about. I had plenty of my own questions on that topic, too.

There had been a chain of little events, like a line of dominoes, leading up to Erika Konno's ongoing harassment of Tama-chan. Konno and her faction had even vandalized the haniwa charm that Tama-chan loved so much. It only ended when Hinami slaughtered Konno with her cold and calculated plan, and Tama-chan stepped in with her characteristic candor.

For my part, I'd gotten Mizusawa and a couple of other people involved in helping Tama-chan out behind the scenes—but on that final day, Hinami put on a show that went far beyond anything I was capable of.

Anyway, the notorious Erika Konno was reduced to a sobbing mess in front of the whole class.

I thought I understood what made Hinami tick better than most of our classmates did, but I had no idea what she was thinking when that went down. I still didn't.

Why had she chosen such a cruel course of action?

"You planned out everything you did to Konno beforehand… didn't you?" I asked in an intentionally serious tone.

She nodded casually. "Yes, I did."

Her curt response stung.

"Thought so." I looked away as I offered a meaningless reply. Winter was already here. The cold, dry air seeped in around the window frames and chilled my fingertips.

"I made Konno think that Nakamura and Yuzu were conspiring

against her. Once I'd knocked her off-balance with the suspicion, all I had to do was give her another little push, and she toppled right over. That was her weak point; she just needed a push. I exposed her for what she was without looking like an aggressor, and then the whole mess was over. That's all." She explained everything so calmly, like it didn't amount to much.

I winced again. "You're saying you had to do it to make her stop harassing Tama-chan?"

I met her eyes, and she held my gaze as she nodded.

"Yes. If I didn't, Konno wouldn't have stopped." Her eyes sharpened as she went on. "Since, y'know, she was getting pretty upset after what she saw," she said accusingly.

"What she saw" was probably my own actions.

"…Sorry."

One of the things that had pushed Erika and her groupies to cross the line with their harassment was that they'd happened to see Tama-chan meeting with me, Mizusawa, and a few other people in our group. Apparently, Hinami knew about that as well.

She sighed. "So that was you…"

"Yeah," I admitted, looking away. "It was stupid of me."

She gave another dramatic sigh. "That's partly why I did what I did." Her explanation finished, she pressed her lips together.

I couldn't really argue with her. Everything worked out in the end, including the damaged charm, but when I thought about how Tama-chan had been hurt, about the permanent scar on her favorite charm, I had to admit I'd messed up big time.

What if I'd left everything up to Hinami from the start? What if she'd been able to resolve the situation more peacefully? Had my attempt to help made everything worse?

But something about that logic didn't sit right with me.

"I agree, my mistake was partly responsible for making Konno angry. What she did was really cruel." I paused. "But so were you. You didn't have to go that far."

"'Cruel'…I see." Hinami echoed the word almost experimentally.

I nodded. "You used her crush to rip her to shreds in front of everyone. To me…that was just too much," I said simply.

Hinami tilted her head slightly, as if she was thinking. Or maybe sizing me up. "But it was the only way to shut her down quickly, right?" she replied, without any emotion in her voice or on

her face. “Once Konno got that angry, she wouldn’t stop until someone knocked her off her high horse and made an example of her. Her engine was already running full tilt. I had to destroy her.”

Hinami’s confident, no-nonsense explanation was fairly convincing.

“Don’t you agree?” she asked me.

“Um…”

It was a challenge. I think her confidence came from all her experience in observing and manipulating the mood in our class. I’d only been observing that particular monster for a little while, but even that was enough to know Hinami was partly right.

Consider Konno’s position.

To stay on top in the classroom, she had to win every fight, and a very clear Konno-versus-Tama-chan dynamic had been established. What would happen if Konno had thrown down her sword after witnessing Tama-chan hanging out with Mizusawa and Takei, two top-tier guys?

If you were fighting for the top of the class, that was indefensible.

I could understand why Hinami thought a public execution was the only way to end it.

“Well…you could be right.”

She wrinkled her brows suspiciously. “You agree? Then why did you—?”

“But,” I interrupted, taking a deep breath, “even if that’s true…”

I thought back to the final stage of Hinami’s plan—the part I just couldn’t accept.

“…you didn’t have to give her that final kick, did you?”

I looked her in the eye, as I often did. But I could never see into her heart.

“…What final ki—?”

“She was already down!” I snapped.

Konno was crying, and the mood of the class had obviously shifted in Hinami’s favor. She’d demonstrated she was infinitely more powerful, popular, and capable than Konno. Victory was hers. She’d achieved a technical knockout, but she didn’t stop. She had manipulated her well-intentioned pawn into pouring salt onto Konno’s wounds after her opponent had already succumbed.

“You didn’t need to use Nakamura like that. When you got him

to offer Konno a tissue from the tissue cover Izumi made him."

I could concede everything up until that. I still didn't approve of the cruelty and mercilessness of her methods, but if that was what it took to rescue her friend from the bullying taking over her life, I could probably call it a necessary evil.

But not that last part.

"You were just adding insult to injury," I said with a bit more force behind my words.

As I stared silently at Hinami, she gave a slow, uncharacteristically humble nod.

"You're right."

"What?"

Her admission caught me off guard. "B-but then why…?" I sputtered, confused.

She didn't even protest—which meant she accepted her final act wasn't necessary to stop the harassment.

But this was Aoi Hinami, who had done whatever her goals demanded with the consistency of a robot.

What did it mean?

"Why were you so…?"

Her eyes were filled with cold, quiet anger. "Cruel?" she finished.

She barely moved as she spoke, and the unusual harshness of her reply unsettled something deep inside me.

I could hear a sharpness to her breath, and my blood ran a little colder.

"Compared with what she did to Hanabi, I'd hardly call that cruel."

Her speech was far slower and less clipped than normal.

The words were powerful, but instead of drawing their strength from logic and experience as they usually did, they filled Sewing Room #2 with emotion.

"That's…" I was surprised.

I mean, think about what those words meant.

"That's what?" She waited grumpily for me to continue.

I wasn't sure if I should go on, but I did. "You're saying…it was revenge?" Even as I spoke, I thought about what an un-Hinami-like

word that was.

Revenge.

On the surface, it was hard to imagine the literal embodiment of objectivity and perspective caring about something like revenge.

"Yes, I am."

All I could do was nod silently. If she was going to admit it, then I didn't have anything else to say.

I mean…

…the action she took wasn't intended to get her closer to a goal.

It wasn't intended to prevent future problems.

It was simply—an attack.

As I stared wordlessly at the floor, Hinami spoke up. I think she wanted to escape the silence, which was unusual for her.

"…What? Yes, I can get angry. Is that such a surprise?" She sounded annoyed, but also unsettled.

"No…"

Once again, I wasn't sure what to say. I wasn't sure how to explain why I felt this way, but it sounded somehow like an excuse, like she was trying desperately to hide a sense of guilt.

"Hanabi has a strong moral compass, and she sticks to it. I like that about her. When Konno started harassing Hirabayashi-san, Hanabi stood up in front of everyone and said she was wrong, without trying to get something out of it or beat around the bush. I thought her strength was so beautiful," she said with uncharacteristic passion. "So when Konno started stomping all over Hanabi for no reason, I couldn't let her get away with it. When I heard Hanabi say she just wanted to escape, I decided it couldn't go on."

I stared at Hinami in shock.

"I did what I had to in order to make it stop. So I crushed Konno."

I'd never heard her talk about anything aside from games in that way.

"That is *all*." She let out a short, hot breath.

"Oh," I said.

For a second, she looked embarrassed. "…What's wrong with that?" she asked, a little defiantly.

"Nothing, it's just—"

"Then I don't see what the problem is," she said. She was

speaking quickly, as if she wanted to wrap up the conversation. Again, this wasn't the Hinami I knew.

If I were to sum up that "off" feeling I had, it would be this.

"Here's what I think…," I began, trying to stay as honest as I could.

I took a deep breath and considered what to say, what she would only hear from me.

"You did that just to hurt her. There was nothing to be gained from it, for anyone. It's…"

I felt like my thoughts were slowly coming into focus.

"It's what?" Hinami said, as if she'd already guessed. She crossed her arms and glared at me.

I gulped, trying not to let her intimidate me, and searched for the right words to express that dissonance inside me.

I took those words I found at the bottom of my heart and threw them at her head-on.

"It's not something NO NAME would think was…*right*," I said, a little sharply.

For a moment, Hinami sank into thought.

"…Well…"

For once, she was at a loss for words. I didn't see this expression often.

Finally, she gave a satisfied nod.

"That may be true. But…"

She sighed and uncrossed her arms.

"…there are some things even I can't accept."

* * *

After my meeting with Hinami, I sat at my desk observing the classroom before morning homeroom started.

"Did you see Mahoto's show the other day?"

"The one where he was stuck to the wall? Yeah!"

"Well…"

The conversations around me were about TV shows, YouTube videos, and weekend events. The noise was as scattered as usual, but I sensed at the bottom of it all that everyone was feeling one another out.

I thought back to the day when sparks flew between the two top girls in class.

Hinami's attitude had been calm and reasonable the whole time, but the public face-off was itself a major event. The vestiges of their fight were still impacting the mood and creating little, stagnant pools in the general flow.

On the surface, nothing had changed, but I could feel subtle differences from before. As I looked out on the peaceful yet ever so slightly uneasy scene, I suddenly heard a sleepy voice coming from next to me.

"Morning."

When I turned around, Izumi was holding back a yawn with one hand while waving the other at me. Her eyes could strike down a normie with a single glance on the best of days, but the way they glistened a little gave them several times their normal power. M-man, she sure knew how to get me.

"Oh, hey. Good morning." I still managed to return her greeting in a natural, casual tone. It was practically a reflex at this point.

I'd taken some damage from the sparkle in her eyes, but the rest of me was able to respond automatically. Interesting. The same thing happened with *Atafami*. With enough practice, even when someone launched a combo I wasn't expecting, my fingers pressed the buttons to dodge on their own. This felt kind of similar.

"It sure is getting cold. I could see my breath this morning!" Izumi chatted aimlessly as she set her bag on her desk.

I might be capable of reflexive greetings, but I bet Izumi made even this kind of small talk automatically. The road to the mountaintop is steep, but at least now I could imagine the peak.

"Yeah, winter is definitely here," I answered. "Hey, speaking of which…"

"What's up?"

I was about to nudge the conversation in a new direction by introducing a topic of my own. If I wanted to get better at manipulating the mood, I had to build up my skills on a daily basis. Seeing Izumi do it almost unconsciously made me want to try even harder.

Plus, I already had a topic in mind to ask her about.

"How has Akiyama been doing since the whole…showdown?"

I had to think on the spot and make it sound casual—I'd learned that from memorizing conversation topics. All that hard

work had earned me more than just a long list of topics.

Before I even got to the memorizing stage, I had to come up with a bunch of subjects that I thought would work with a particular person.

In other words, by thinking about different things to talk about each day, I could work consistently toward coming up with those subjects myself. It was kind of like taking practice swings at making conversation.

Hinami was the only one who knew I was practicing beforehand, but I was also gradually getting faster at ad-libbing topics on the spot, like I'd just done with Izumi.

I felt like I was training to master a new kind of magic, and it seemed like my base MP and magic power were going up automatically as a result.

"Mika and Erika…?" Izumi pursed her lips, trying to decide how to answer my question.

On the day of the showdown between Hinami and Erika, Hinami had manipulated Mika Akiyama into revealing her hostility toward Konno, the leader of her own clique. That rebellion set off the whole incident.

From my perspective, there weren't a lot of hard feelings in Konno's group despite what had happened. But what had Izumi sensed from the inside? I was curious.

She thought for a few moments, a serious but still somehow lighthearted look on her face.

"Well…girl stuff," she whispered, then gave an exhausted sigh.

"O-oh, really?"

I'd never experienced the fabled "girl stuff" myself, but based on stories I'd read, I could guess what she was getting at. Lots of girls' manga talked about those messy and awkward feelings.

"You mean like a cold-war situation?"

"Yeah…" Izumi glanced at Konno and her group. "They act like they're getting along on the surface, but as soon as they're apart, they start really going in on each other."

I smiled cynically, imagining the situation. Judging from Izumi's behavior lately…

"…And you're caught in the middle?"

She nodded, a theatrically pained expression on her face. "Eeeeexactly." She rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Ha-ha…thought so," I said, taking care not to laugh rudely.

“Sounds tough.”

Izumi nodded. “But I’m the only one who can do it…so I’ll hang in there.”

“Gotcha.”

She was staring ahead with a determined gaze. Ever since she started dating Nakamura, her words had a flexible yet unwavering strength. Ah, the power of love.

Okay! Time to try something out.

I decided to tell her what I’d just thought but be a little clever about how I said it. Yes, it was time to apply what I’d learned about messing with people. I’d gotten steadily better at normal teasing, so now I was thinking about raising the bar on my technique.

“You’re so thoughtful.”

She looked surprised and a little embarrassed. “No, I’m not!”

Without missing a beat, I went on in a teasing tone. “Especially since you started dating Nakamura.”

Her face flushed even redder. “Sh-shut up!”

“Oh, sorry.”

The apology came out on reflex. *Ack, I didn’t need to say that.* I’ve ripped off Mizusawa’s technique plenty of times—starting off with a compliment and then teasing them—but if Mizusawa was in my place right now, he’d have laughed at her reaction. If I’d remembered to do that, it would have been perfect.

But my execution wasn’t half-bad for a bottom-tier character. I even sounded fairly normie-ish.

If I were to name this technique of getting someone’s guard down and then teasing them, I’d call it the Mizusawa Method 2.0. Filing the outcome away in my mind, I thought about how to direct the next turn of the conversation.

“Anyway…I’m sure it’s tough right now, but hopefully, everything will go back to normal soon. Among your group, I mean.”

“Yeah…” Izumi let her gaze drift onto Tama-chan, who was in the middle of the classroom. “But it’s definitely better this way. I’m glad all that awkwardness is over. And I’m really grateful for what Tama-chan did.”

I followed Izumi’s gaze.

“Hey! Stop sniffing me, Minmi!” Tama-chan was yelling.

“Ooh, you smell different again! Did you change your fabric softener…? Or maybe your detergent…?”

“Why do you care?”

“Ah-ha-ha. Mimimi, you’re getting on Tama-chan’s nerves!”

Tama-chan was joking around with Mimimi and some other classmates. She didn’t seem uncomfortable at all. She had a secure place in this class now that her genuine character had been accepted. And Mimimi was still the class clown.

I looked back at Izumi. “Me too. Tama-chan really saved the day.”

My guess is that if Tama-chan hadn’t intervened at the end of the showdown between Konno and Hinami, Konno and Akiyama’s relationship would have been destroyed. If Konno had remained a permanent enemy of the class, Akiyama would have led everyone in

a charge to exact revenge on the tyrant queen.

And if that had happened, their relationship would have been impossible to repair. In that sense, you could almost call Tama-chan the peacemaker between them.

"She did! I was impressed—like, I really respect her now."

"Not many people can do what she did."

I didn't mean among just high schoolers or girls, either. That bright sparkle really was Tama-chan's strength.

Izumi tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, a world-weary look on her face. "…I feel like I should take a page from her book."

"…Yeah?"

Then I realized something.

Izumi was trying to break away from her habit of ignoring her feelings for the sake of harmony, so the way Tama-chan stood up in front of everyone and acted according to her own convictions must have shown Izumi exactly what she wanted to be. I bet that scene in class was very impactful for her.

"I've gotta change," she said to remind herself. "I'm still not really happy with myself."

I decided this was a good time to tell her what I was thinking, in my own way. Not using the Mizusawa Method or anything like that—right now, I was saying what's on my mind, according to the Tomozaki Method.

"…I think you've changed a lot lately."

She had. Remembering how she was before the Nakamura incident or the sports tournament, I could see the transformation.

When I was first starting my training, one of my goals was to get the people around me to tell me I had changed, as a way of measuring the results. If I'd noticed a clear difference in Izumi, she must have grown a lot.

"Even I can see it," I added a little shyly, being careful not to talk down to her.

To my surprise, Izumi gave a modest little nod. "I know," she said, looking at me solemnly. "I've been thinking that myself lately."

"…You have?"

She nodded again, then took a hand mirror from her pocket, fixed her hair, and stood up. "Okay, I'm going over there! See you in a minute!"

She raised her hand up to her face and gave me a perky little

wave.

"Okay, bye." I copied her cute gesture. She walked toward the window where Konno and Akiyama were standing. She had work to do as a mediator, and it was work that only she could do.

I lowered my hand and sighed.

Talking one-on-one with a natural-born normie was exhausting, but I definitely didn't dislike it. I felt like I was getting EXP, but more importantly, I'd said what I wanted to say and asked what I wanted to ask.

As I got better at maneuvering through life, I was having more fun playing the game. As they say, life imitates art—and video games.

* * *

The bell rang, and morning homeroom started. Kawamura-sensei, our teacher, stood in front of the class and started talking in her usual listless but somehow also forceful tone.

"So the school festival is coming up. This week, we'll start getting ready for it after school, so I want you to think about what our class should do. Keep in mind we'll have a lot of guests and kids from other schools attending."

"Wow, it's that time already!"

The words *school festival* evoked a passionate response from Takei, who threw both his arms into the air and shook them around. Takei is nothing if not consistent.

That sparked a similarly excited response from the rest of the class, with everyone shouting "Yay!" and "Let's do this!" Apparently, Takei is also contagious.

"This year, it'll take place on December twelfth. As usual, the festival and the Christmas party are both on the day of the closing ceremony. Think of this as your last chance to have fun. After that, you'll be studying twenty-four seven."

The school festival really snuck up on me.

Sekitomo High's festival took place a little later than most schools', and it was one of the livelier festivals in the prefecture, which was unusual for a college-prep school. Part of the reason it was such a big event was because we combined it with the Christmas party.

Not only that, but it also took place at the end of the calendar year and the end of second semester. For us second-years, who would be organizing the festival, it was the last, crazy celebration before we went into study mode for our college entrance exams. Knowing we wouldn't really be able to cut loose like this later motivated us to make it as fun as we could. I think the general intent behind timing it at the end of the year was to help mark the transition. In that sense, I could understand why such an academics-focused college-prep school had such a big school festival.

"The third-years won't be taking part because they're getting ready for their exams, so the bulk of the work is up to you. During Wednesday's long homeroom, we'll be choosing a few girls and a few guys to serve on the organizing committee, so if you're interested in participating, start thinking about that. That's about it for today. Okay, all rise."

Everyone stood up, chatting noisily with anticipation. As soon as we'd recited the salutation for the end of class, we all split off into our cliques and excitedly discussed the festival.

Huh. In my previous culture festivals, I was totally out of the loop, but this year would probably be different. The festival had some loose connections to the class pecking order, yes, but more than that, I was certain Hinami planned to give me some kind of super-Spartan assignment related to it.

"Braiiiiiiin!!"

"Whoa!"

My thoughts were interrupted by an extremely cheerful voice and my shoulders being sandwiched to death.

"Ow!!"

Turning in the direction of this undeserved attack, I unsurprisingly found Mimimi standing next to me. She was pressing both her hands against my shoulders. What, so now her standard thump on the back involved two hands? Mimimi Attack 2.0, huh?

She giggled. "Hee-hee-hee. You'll never escape me now."

"Yeah, 'cause you snuck up on me!"

"I'll give you that."

Actually, this version was probably easier to evade because it was so much bigger.

"Geez…"

I waited for Mimimi to go on, but for some reason, she just stared silently at me. A few weird seconds of silence ensued.

“Um…what?”

What was she pausing for? She must have had some other reason for shouting my nickname and running up to me aside from making a Tomozaki sandwich.

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘what’?” For some reason, she looked puzzled.

“I just thought…you wanted to talk to me about something?”

Her eyes went wide with realization, and she pointed at my face.

“What?” I said.

She kept looking at me earnestly. “…Uh, what was I going to say?”

“Oh, come on,” I teased reflexively. Going with the flow is a way of life for her. “I swear…”

I was searching exasperatedly for a new conversation topic when Mimimi suddenly said, “Oh yeah!” and clapped her hands.

“Huh?”

“I remembered!”

What the heck? She really is a free spirit. At least it makes talking to her easy.

“I was wondering if you were going to volunteer for the festival committee!”

“Oh,” I said, thinking for a second. “…I’m not sure.”

Honestly speaking, I wasn’t so integrated into the normie world that I’d actively volunteer for a role like that myself, but I had a feeling Hinami was probably going to make me do it anyway. I was mentally bracing for it.

“Really? But I was looking forward to seeing the Brain in action again!”

“Um, how…?”

“I know my Brain; whatever you’d come up with would be super fun.”

“No way, I can’t do anything.”

“Still so modest…”

Mimimi smiled and poked me with her elbow. What in the world was she expecting from me? She thought too much of me. Okay, I was proud of the effort I put in during the student council election, but in the broader game of life, I was still just barely out of the tutorial phase. Plus, a legendary Nen user once said people who call themselves intermediate-level players get into the most trouble,

so I wasn't about to let my guard down.

"Anyway, I sure am looking forward to the festival," Mimimi said innocently.

Looking forward to it, huh?

I thought about that phrase, and about the school festival.

It goes without saying that last year, I was too much of a loner to have fun at the festival at all. I also had zero positive associations with it since the beginning of junior high. I even remember leaving right after attendance was taken, probably so I could go home and play video games. What can I say? That bright and cheerful atmosphere is toxic to loners. I lost five HP with every step I took.

But this year, I genuinely meant what I was about to say to Mimimi.

"…Yeah, I am, too." I surprised myself saying that, but I went on. "The truth is, I've never looked forward to the school festival at all before, but this year, I kind of do."

"…No way!"

Maybe since I'd never had fun in the past, I'd be able to experience it even more fully this time around.

Unlike last year, I'd found a comfortable position in class. I had friends who I liked talking to, and most crucially, I *wanted* to have fun.

Of course, I don't think going home to play video games is wrong, necessarily, but a little variety in my entertainment never hurts.

"Well, good! You can replace your bad memories from last year with better ones!"

"Yeah, guess so," I said, briefly considering Mimimi's optimistic words. "Although, they aren't bad memories."

"Really?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Going home to play video games was super fun, too."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

Mimimi grinned at my direct answer. "Spoken like a true gamer! Once a gamer, always a gamer!"

She squeezed my shoulders between both her hands again. *Owww. Enough with 2.0 already.* And now she was doing it for virtually no reason.

But I was honestly grateful that she accepted my way of

thinking without prejudice. She even smiled when she heard it.

"It would be more accurate to say I don't remember the festival than to say I didn't have fun." I was so relaxed now that I was starting to babble.

"You don't remember? But it was just last year."

She looked puzzled. Yeah, I could see how a normie would find that hard to understand. I decided to explain the way of the loner. "It's like… Okay, so we've had school festivals since junior high, right?"

"Um, yeah…" Mimimi tilted her head, waiting for me to go on.

I continued confidently. "That means I've been to four school festivals total. But I never had any friends during that time, so every year was the same experience for me. And that means—I don't really remember what happened when."

"Why do you sound almost proud of that?" Mimimi cheerfully teased. I guess this time, my confidence only made my sad story sound sadder.

"Well, it's kind of like how middle-aged guys can't keep all the new celebrities straight. To a loner, all those big, fun, crowded events look the same, so all the memories kinda run together."

When I finished explaining my gloomy logic, Mimimi gazed at me with pity. "…Well, not this year."

"Huh?"

She pointed cheerfully at the sun pouring in through the window. "This year, let's do everything we can to make it a blast!"

She sounded very hopeful. I knew she was trying really hard to cheer me up, and her positivity was contagious on any day. The word *fun* was made for her.

"…For sure!" I answered, thinking about the coming weeks.

Yeah, she was right.

If we have to do it anyway, we might as well enjoy it, I thought, and I meant it.

What would this school festival be like for me?

2

Even fetch quests raise your level

It was break time before switching classrooms.

"…Okay."

I was standing nervously in front of the door to the library.

At this time of day, Kikuchi-san would be already in there. When I opened the door, I would enter her calming, peaceful world. And by now, I should be completely used to talking one-on-one with her—right?

But on this day, I felt a little different. Of course, there was a reason I was so nervous.

I slowly reached out to the door, thinking back to my meeting with Hinami that morning.

* * *

"All right, let's wrap up the small talk and discuss your plans moving forward."

"You never waste a second, huh?"

A second earlier, we'd been deep in conversation about the incident between Tama-chan and Konno, but then Hinami had just casually switched to a completely different topic. I had to stay focused so her conversational agility wouldn't trip me up.

But the way she repositioned herself so easily was pure Hinami. Mask or no mask, she had the raw ability.

"Of course not. Especially when it's been weeks since my last chance to give you an assignment for your goal."

"Well…that's true." I nodded.

My goal—to have a girlfriend by the time we started our third year. Fall was already turning to winter, so that only gave me three or four more months, including winter break.

“We need to make up for lost time.”

“So you’re saying…you have a new assignment for me?” I asked with some resignation.

Hinami grinned. “Hexactly.”

“Haven’t heard that in a while.”

I guess her mind was on other things.

Huh… That’s actually kinda interesting.

That meant her life at school must have calmed down enough for her to joke around. Of course, I was a little embarrassed by the nostalgia I felt hearing her say “hexactly” again.

“Right? I have to use it now and then, you know. Hanabi established her ‘character’ thanks to your strategy, and I have to set an example, too.”

“So it’s all part of the plan…”

Hinami giggled. It was really only when she said “hexactly” or talked about gaming that I could see one layer past her mask. Which meant that most of the time, the mask was way too powerful.

“Anyway, what’s my assignment?”

“Well…” Her expression turned suddenly serious, and she seemed to size me up with her eyes. “You’ve said it yourself in the past.”

The mood was quickly getting heavy, and I gulped. “…Said what?”

She slowly pointed a finger at me. “That you’d like to set your goals and assignments based on what you really want.”

I nodded. “Yeah. No lying to myself, no acting fake. And I reserve the right to turn down any assignments or exercises that would make me do that.”

For some reason, Hinami grinned at my straightforward answer.

“Right,” she said, baring her white teeth ominously. “And I hope you’re ready to live up to those words.”

I flinched; she was up to something. What? What kind of sadistic command was she about to give me? But I wouldn’t let her beat me. I was at a higher level now. Bring on the ridiculous assignments.

Suddenly, I felt bolder than before.

“Of course I will. A man never goes back on his word.”

“In that case…I’ll start by asking you a question.”

“Okay, what?”

She rested her cheek on her palm and leaned toward me with a sadistic gaze.

"Who would you rather date right now—Fuka-chan, Mimimi, Yuzu, or Hanabi?"

"Wha…?!" That was a fastball. I leaned back.

As I stood there reeling from all the information whirling around my mind—not all of it necessary or relevant—Hinami closed in for the next hit.

"Or maybe…me?"

"You…?!"

Hinami rested her finger on her glistening, exquisitely parted lips, drawing my eyes to them. The glint of the winter light highlighted the vaguely seductive moisture.

"So…who do you like?"

She was obviously acting as she looked up at me with adoring eyes, but I still couldn't help feeling flustered by the cuteness of her expression, gestures, and tone of voice. It was just instinct.

"Um, well…"

Her question was definitely designed to throw me off-balance.

"Yes?"

Her moist eyes were doing a perfect job of making me blush…

But if I focused on the content of the question…I had to admit it was important.

I'd told Hinami I didn't want to chase after a girl if I wasn't sure I liked her—and that I wanted to work toward what I really wanted in life.

She'd accepted that.

If we were going to use my own feelings to decide the target of my next assignment, then this was a crucial question.

She was asking me to choose for myself, of my own free will, who I wanted to date.

Kikuchi-san, Mimimi, Izumi, or Tama-chan. Those were my options.

"…Hey, wait a second." I'd just realized something.

"What?"

"Why did you include Izumi? That doesn't make sense."

Weren't Izumi and Nakamura starry-eyed, newly matched lovebirds? I mean, Mr. Cool Guy was walking around with a hand-knit tissue cover in his pocket. *Guess he does have a sweet side after all.*

Hinami sighed. "You may have moved up a level or two, but you will always have the heart of a virgin."

"I literally am a virgin, not that it's any of your business."

I wish she'd stop full-on dissing me. It was depressing.

"Listen. If you want to pick Yuzu, that's a legitimate option. Relationships are shaky—they can end at any moment. And it's not like they're legally bound to each other. It's ridiculous to give so much respect to something so impermanent."

"U-uh, I'm sure you're right, but…"

Ninety percent of high school romances probably don't last, but…I could hardly believe she'd say that after seeing how Izumi and Nakamura got together. I mean, it took all our help and some major effort from Izumi herself, but now they were dating for real. I'd hoped Hinami would say they might end up getting married or something.

"I bet you think they might end up getting married or something, don't you?"

"Huh?"

"Well, it's not unthinkable, but it's ridiculous to tiptoe around hoping for it. They're a bunch of idealists who worship romance like it's a religion. It's so boring."

"Wow, that's a pretty strong opinion when you don't even know if that's what I was thinking."

Of course, her guess was exactly right. Sometimes, I felt like she had ESP. It happened when we were playing *Atafami*, too. *Scary. I wish she'd stop with that.*

She waved off my complaint.

“There’s no rule that says you’re not allowed to go after a girl with a boyfriend. It’s entirely acceptable. They’re not married, and even if you did steal her from him, it would just mean you won at the game of love fair and square by being the better guy. No one would hate you for it. You could even say it was a good thing in the long term, if it means you and your rival ended up as better people.”

“Well, if you put it like that…”

I could see her point. I had a weakness for arguments that used game analogies; her values were so close to mine in that realm.

“Right? Still, Yuzu would be a very challenging choice for you at this point. You’d be wiser to choose someone else since you’re still barely out of the tutorial. You’ll be at a disadvantage in terms of raw stats at least until you start your third year.”

“I wasn’t planning to pick her anyway…”

She and Nakamura were too perfect together, and I didn’t have the motivation to try to break them up.

“Oh, so Yuzu isn’t your type?”

“That’s not what I meant!” I shot back anxiously. I could see how my comment could be interpreted that way, though. Bottom-tier characters can sound stuck-up when they don’t mean to.

“So you do want to date her?”

“No, I didn’t mean that, either…”

“Mm-hmm…” She gave me a challenging look.

“What?” I stared back at her.

She stuck her pointer finger in the air. “Okay, imagine this,” she said, smiling as she prepared to get to the heart of the matter. “If Yuzu broke up with Nakamura and told you she wanted to go out with you, what would you do?”

“What?!” That was so far out of left field, I almost jumped. “That would never happen!”

“You’re right. It wouldn’t.”

“Um, no,” I said, depressed that she agreed with me so quickly. *So why did she ask?*

“But hypothetically, what if she did? What would you do?”

“That’s a tough question to answer…”

“Listen. This doesn’t just go for Yuzu. The same goes for Mimimi, Fuka-chan, or Hanabi. If one of them told you right now that they liked you, what would you do? Haven’t you ever thought about that?”

Honestly, no. “I mean…that would never happen.”

“I know.”

“Hey now.”

Again, she agreed right away. *I know it’s true, but it still hurts. Can’t you soften the blow a little? Bottom-tier characters are people, too, you know.*

“…But your inability to say unconditionally one way or the other is connected to your situation right now.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind what I just said. If one of them confessed to you, what would you do? You say you don’t want to pursue anyone until you’re sure you like them, but you haven’t even thought about who you might like. Don’t you think that’s even more insincere?” Hinami tore into me, completely brushing over the part I was most curious about.

“Well, if you put it like that…”

She was right; it was hypocritical to say my goal was to get a girlfriend and then completely ignore my own feelings. The only places a guy can get a girlfriend without taking any risks are a dating sim or a harem rom-com.

“This is all hypothetical, so give it some thought.”

“Right, all hypothetical.”

“Yeah. Okay, so imagine you’re chatting with a girl, and at the end of the conversation, she asks if she can talk to you after school. She says she wants to have a private conversation, so she invites you to meet her on the landing of the stairs in this building, because no one ever comes here. And when you get here and you’re alone together, she blushes and tells you that actually, she’s liked you for a while. That kind of thing.”

“Yep, I’m definitely imagining it.”

When she described it in that much detail, I could almost see the whole scenario.

Here in the old school building…just the two of us. *What is this, a movie? Plus, I haven’t done anything in this scene. Is that okay?*

But the question is, how do I react? If I turn her down, I’ll come off as conceited, but if I go along without feeling the same as she does, that’s wrong, too.

The vague hypothetical turned into a movie in my mind.

So what if all that happened, and then…

…Tama-chan said she liked me?

Or Izumi said she liked me?

Or Mimimi?

Or Kikuchi-san?

Right then—

"You're blushing."

"What?!" I yelped.

Hinami was having the time of her life with this. I swear. She definitely did that on purpose. I just about died of shock.

"Well? Now that you've played out the whole thing in your mind, did you figure it out?"

"…Figure what out?" I asked uncomfortably.

Hinami tapped me on the center of my chest. "Wasn't there was someone you could imagine dating?" She smiled confidently.

"No… I mean, I don't know."

Hinami reacted triumphantly to my vague answer. "Well, that person will be the target of your future assignments." She raised one eyebrow. "Which means those assignments will be based on what you want, correct?"

"…Yeah."

Hinami snorted condescendingly. "Your assignments from this point on will mainly be about getting you two together."

She won, I had to admit. Her ever-rational approach left no room for contradiction.

Just now, she'd made me imagine a certain scenario in order to assess my feelings, then said she'd base my assignments on those feelings.

That way, what I wanted became the foundation for her actions, and my original concern was done away with. I'd been swept up by her negotiating skill; since there was no possible counterargument, I couldn't do much about it.

"By the way, it's best if you have at least two options."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

Hinami gave an exasperated sigh. "I'm fairly sure I explained that a long time ago. Do you need to hear it again?"

"…No."

As she stared at me, I tried to think back. Yeah, we *had* talked about something like that when I first started training.

"Now that you mention it, I do remember. You said it's like how in a shooting game, you can play better if you've got a couple of lives left instead of just one, right? 'Cause you can't play as well

when you know you might be screwed."

"Right."

She had a point. It wasn't just shooting games, either—whenever I have only a few stocks left, I get panicky and sloppy.

"And you said it was better to go after more than one girl at a time for the same reason."

"Exactly… Oh, wait," she said, pointing at me sharply. "Hexactly."

"It doesn't really work if you forget the first time."

Hinami smiled with satisfaction. "You really are getting better at firing back during conversations."

"I—I thought I'd give it a shot anyway…"

What, so she was giving pop quizzes now? Just having a normal conversation with her is exhausting. *I wish she'd dial it back every so often.*

"But you're right. Remaining composed is extremely important."

"Composed?" I wasn't following.

"Listen. Love is a battle, and human emotion is a variable that also happens to be critical to the fight. When you lose your cool, your emotions get confused, and when your emotions get confused, your actions do, too. And when that happens, the other person can tell, and that sets your relationship back. I might even go so far as to say that maintaining a stable emotional state in a strategic and rational way is the single most important point when it comes to love."

So that's the key, huh?

"Then can't I just try not to lose my cool? I shouldn't have to go after more than one person at once, right? There's gotta be other ways."

"What, like meditating or something?"

"Th-that's not what I meant… Don't you have any other suggestions?"

Hinami sighed like I'd completely missed the point. "You have no idea what you're talking about because you have zero experience in love. The reason most relationships fail before they even start is that one person gets worried that the other person is going to disappear, and so they start fawning and acting all weak and turning the other person off."

"R-really?"

Hinami nodded. “I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced this, since games are your one true love…but it’s like when you get a LINE message from the person you like and freak out. You start swinging from happy to sad until you can’t think logically at all, and the reply you send is totally unnatural. Or you end up overthinking it and write something that sounds cold. Then you hate yourself for it, and when you see the person, you spend too much time explaining yourself, or you panic and leave awkward silences in the conversation.”

Wow, that was a strangely specific example. Was this Hinami’s own weakness, perhaps?

“Speaking from experience?” I asked jokingly.

Hinami giggled, sounding very unruffled. “Sure am. This poor guy tried to dump me.”

“Oh…”

I’d just been treated to a beautiful reflect spell, a reminder of why she’s in the top tier. My noob skills don’t work against her at all.

Hinami went on, having taken no damage whatsoever. “My point is, panicking and messing up in love is usually caused by the cognitive dissonance that occurs when you believe there’s only one person in the world for you. It’s a narrow-minded perspective.”

“Cognitive dissonance…?” I parroted. For a talk about love, this was getting really technical.

“It’s an easy mistake to make. I bet you’re thinking I’m telling you to pursue multiple girls at once, but you’re worried that will be too difficult.”

“Well, basically. I mean, it sounded like the strategy of a bona fide Casanova.”

“Actually, the opposite is true.”

“The opposite?”

Hinami stuck her pointer finger in the air.

“When it comes to love, pursuing multiple people at once is easier than pursuing just one.”

“…Huh.”

I was genuinely surprised; that thought had never entered my head.

“Just telling yourself that there are other people who you could date gives you a bit of distance, and that allows you to keep your cool so you can make your decisions rationally.”

“I can see that…”

Leaving aside the question of integrity, her technique did seem like it would help me maintain some perspective when I was thinking about everything. I could probably even run a list of pros and cons with my options. But was that really a good thing?

“This isn’t just defensive; it’s an offensive move, too. When you let your crush catch a glimpse of her competitors, you throw her off-balance.”

“Hold on. That is a really underhanded thing to suggest.”

She sighed. “It’s nothing. Calling it ‘underhanded’ is just a sign that you’re still worshipping romance, too.”

“You mean it gets worse…?”

Is love really such a dirty game? And if so, can someone like me really win at it?

“Don’t forget; there’s one more added benefit.”

“There is?”

So we’re killing three birds with this multiple-girl strategy now?

Hinami grinned and pointed at me. “You’re convinced it’s hard. So you’ll have more self-confidence after achieving it.”

“…Ah.”

Once again, she had me convinced. Still think we’re playing dirty with this, though.

On the other hand, I really could use more confidence. I had it in spades when it came to games, but when it came to love, not so much.

Thanks to my gaming confidence, I was able to make decisive choices at critical points in *Atafami*, and I could see how the same thing would apply to love. That ability to trust myself at key moments was more important than I’d realized.

“You need to be more confident. That’s another reason why I want you to start getting closer to multiple girls at once—it’ll help, I promise. It’s an effective strategy for a noob, and your chances with either of your choices will also improve. Of course, this is assuming these are all girls you’d be interested in dating to start with, and I’m not suggesting you cheat on anyone and ask two girls out at once. All I’m saying is that you should get to know them more as people. Then, based on that experience, you can go out with the one you

genuinely want to date. What do you think?"

She was firing arguments at me so fast, it was like I'd just speed-scrolled through a product list on Amazon. I was starting to feel like I'd wanted what she was selling all along.

"Okay, okay… That's really all I have to do?"

"A response worthy of nanashi. You catch on so quick."

"U-uh, thanks…"

"All right then, from now on, I'll be giving you assignments with all that in mind."

"O-okay."

It was really hard to say no right after she complimented me. That must be another of her negotiating techniques. Scary.

"Which brings us to the question of which two you want to get to know better."

"Umm…well…"

"Yes?" She smiled, waiting for my answer.

"…Can I have a little more time to decide?" I asked, glancing away from her.

She made a dissatisfied *hmph*. "How long is 'a little more time'?" Her voice was completely flat.

"Um…about a week?"

She sighed very loudly. "I see."

"Um, sorry."

I apologized reflexively. She could express anger without saying anything specific—that was a high-level technique. I was getting used to her sharp tongue, but when she changed up the pattern, my resistance went down again. Huh. That must have been her goal.

"So? What do you need it for?" she asked curtly.

"Uh…" I searched for the right words, trying to organize my thoughts.

I honestly didn't know why myself, but I really didn't like the idea of just throwing out a name.

And that uncertainty was why I wanted more time. I wanted to give the assignment appropriate attention, too.

"I guess I want to really think about how I feel toward each of them."

"To really think about it, huh?" Hinami's face was blank. She sighed loudly again. "Fine. It's true that you've been so caught up in assignments and class drama that you haven't had many opportunities lately to examine your feelings. Maybe it *would* be

more efficient to take some time now to think. Resting is a basic component of contemporary bodybuilding techniques, you know."

"Thanks, that's a big help." I wasn't sure why she had to mention bodybuilding, but I let out a relieved sigh.

"Okay, you have one week. Two at the most. Spend that time considering who you're interested in and who you want to get to know better."

"A-all right."

Hinami looked up. "Buuuut it would be a waste of time to leave you without any assignment at all, so…I'll give you an easy one."

"Easy?"

"Yes," she said, fiddling with her cell phone. After a second or two, she showed me a slick-looking web page.

"…Instagram?"

There was a long stream of pictures showing trendy clothes, tasty-looking food, images of Hinami and her friends goofing around, more pictures of Hinami's face or her whole self against an elegant backdrop, etcetera, etcetera. *So this is her page, I'm guessing.*

"So you want to remind me that not only can you do anything, you're also a great photographer… Whoa!"

When I scrolled up to the top of the page, I saw how many followers she had.

"Three thousand… You have three thousand followers?"

"Yup," she answered casually, slipping her phone back into her pocket.

"Wait, why? How did you get so many?"

"Who knows?"

"Come on." *What kind of answer is that?*

"I honestly don't know. If I had to explain it, I'd just say I've consistently posted high-quality, public photos of subjects people want to see, and that attracted a lot of followers. I didn't post stuff for a public audience, so it really wasn't intentional on my part."

"So you're an…Instagrammer…" I said the word timidly, since it came from a totally alien world to mine. It felt so strange in my mouth.

"Not particularly. People can follow me if they want, but I don't intend to tailor my content for the public. I don't have the time to put in the effort to be a top influencer."

"You're so disciplined."

Since she couldn't aim for the top, she wouldn't do it at all.

“What did you expect? Youth and beauty will always lose value in the long run. I maybe could expect a return on the investment if I wanted to attract a rich man to marry and take care of me for the rest of my life, but I want to win by using the abilities I built up on my own. That means instead of using temporary youth as a shortcut to my immediate goals, it makes more sense to devote myself to improving my individual skills, which will pay dividends in the future.”

“I’m starting to get scared by how far into the future you look…”

The way she kept so cool was really frightening. I wondered what sort of vision she had for her life.

As I sat there in shock and awe, Hinami coughed. “…Anyway, we’re getting off topic,” she said, tapping the screen of her phone with her fingernails. “Social media is the point.”

Social media—so sites like Twitter and Instagram, and older sites like mixi. Ah, good old mixi. I used to belong to a group on there called “Masters of *Atafami*.” Little did I know back then that I really would master it.

“I think by now, you understand from experience that in order to live the life of a normie, at least at school, you need to rise in the class hierarchy.”

“Yeah, that’s a really basic thing.”

I think everyone has a strong sense of that hierarchy to begin with, but I’d truly begun to notice it once my assignments started. In a closed environment like school, it’s genuinely hard to escape the tyranny of the pecking order.

“Of course, one of the first things you have to do is join a top-level group. Once there, you have to maintain a good position without getting labeled as a poser. Are you following me?”

“Yeah, I get it. Although I’m not sure if I’m already doing that or not.”

Lately, I’d been hanging out with Nakamura’s group, but I wasn’t quite sure what my standing was.

“Right. You’re like ‘the funny guest’ with them.”

“The funny guest?” *That’s…vague.*

Hinami nodded. “You’re not a fully integrated member, but you’re entertaining and unique, which makes you like an invited guest. It’s very common in the school hierarchy.”

“It is?”

Maybe it was because I'd been at the base of the pyramid until recently—buried beneath it, really—but I didn't quite get her point.

"Yes. People who are good at something are temporarily invited into a group, and for a while, they entertain the group with that skill. Then the group either gets bored of them and phases them out, or they get attached to them as a person, and the guest becomes a regular."

I'd never been interested in classroom politics, so I hadn't observed the phenomenon myself, but I could easily imagine it.

"But I'm not particularly good at anything," I said.

Hinami raised one eyebrow. "You're not? Didn't you tell off Erika Konno? And didn't you insult Nakamura on our trip?"

"That's my skill?"

Actually, the first time Mizusawa talked to me, it was about the incident with Konno. And I did feel closer to Nakamura after the overnight.

"Since Nakamura is the dictator type, there aren't many people willing to fire back at him and be funny about it. That makes people take an interest in you."

"I *have* felt more comfortable since that happened…"

"Right?"

I'd assumed the reduced distance was because of our naked encounter in the hot spring, but I guess another factor was at play, too. Of course, all that started with another one of Hinami's assignments.

"That's an example of how positions gradually change, both within groups and the class as a whole. And they never change because of the person's thoughts or ideas—it's always because of how other people see them."

"Yeah, I can appreciate that."

When you're dealing with a group, positions are always shifting. Mood and image matter more than one's individual will. If you wanted to get a little pretentious, you could say it's all about branding.

"So your assignment starting today—is to start a private Instagram and post photos on it."

"You want me to post…on Instagram?"

Just saying the word was still uncomfortable, and now I was supposed to run my own account…?

"Yes. That will give you a new understanding of how people see

you and make you more self-aware. Then you can start controlling your image. Those are the two main goals of this assignment."

"To understand and control my image?"

"Right," Hinami said, showing me her phone again. "Imagine if you didn't know me but you saw this page. What would you think of me?"

"Well, um…"

I took another look at Hinami's photos.

All of them were the kind of thing you'd expect to see from a girl keeping up with the latest trends, but because of the wholesome images of her hanging out with her friends, it wasn't off-putting. There was also a smattering of cute pictures of Mimimi, Izumi, and other girls having a good time together.

Then, every so often, she'd posted pictures of Nakamura and Mizusawa, and since anyone could tell at a glance that both of them were popular, normie guys, that exponentially increased the normie vibes coming off the whole account. *Wait a second, where's Takei?*

"I'd think you were a super normie. But in a nice way, not an obnoxious way."

"Right? That's what I'm talking about. And good work noticing the niceness; that shows you've grown."

"Oh yeah…?"

I was torn between basking in her praise and being annoyed that she called herself nice, which left me without much to say.

"Anyway, using social media and posting snapshots of your life is an opportunity to show off your position to people who look at the page."

"Sh-show off?"

"Some people in class still don't pay any attention to you, right? If they see, like, 'Hey Tomozaki's having fun with Nakamura's group,' you can manipulate your position in class."

I gave a hollow laugh at her calculated approach. "You are a force to be reckoned with."

She was asking me to make a strategic move after scrutinizing how other people saw me. Was that why she was on social media herself?

"I saw some pictures of Mimimi and Nakamura on there…"

"Yeah. I always make sure to get their permission first, but they don't really mind."

"Oh, okay…"

Given that I'd been online constantly since early elementary school, I wasn't entirely comfortable with having pictures of my face posted on the Net…but I guess normies didn't care? Maybe that attitude is old-fashioned now.

"So do you get my point? You're going to use social media to convince the classmates who think you just occasionally drop in on Nakamura's group that you're really a part of it. Solidifying your class image is the goal of this assignment."

"So basically…strengthening my foundation?"

"Mm-hmm. As long as a certain someone keeps stalling on the romance front, that's about all we can do, isn't it?"

"S-sorry…"

I can never let my guard down with her; she hits me with those comments when I least expect it. And they sting extra because I'm not ready for them. Ouch.

"Anyway, I want you to create an Instagram and take the pictures I tell you to take every day."

I thought for a second. "And they'll be normie-ish pictures?"

"Yeah. But that's too broad, sooo…" She grinned. "…During the coming week, while you're deciding on your love interests, I'm giving you a seven-item photo quest."

"A photo quest…"

Again, straight out of a video game…

"Every day, I want you to choose one of the seven assigned photos to shoot and show to me. You'll do that for a week until you've got them all."

"Wow, you weren't kidding…"

Embarrassingly enough, I was actually excited about this. Such is the nature of a gamer.

"I'll send you the assignments now. Wait a minute."

She started briskly typing something into her phone, and I could tell she was really enjoying herself. *Man, I bet this is gonna be a tough one.*

After a couple of minutes, my phone vibrated.

"I sent you them on LINE."

"Oh, okay."

I opened the chat window and read the following message:

- A shot of you with Shuji Nakamura and Takei
- A shot of Takahiro Mizusawa wearing glasses

- A shot of Hanabi Natsubayashi making a funny face
- A shot of Yuzu Izumi eating ice cream
- A shot of at least two girls you've never talked to before
- A shot of Minami Nanami eating ramen
- A shot of you with Fuka Kikuchi

"Wait a second now…"

"Piece of cake, right?" Hinami was smiling happily, but all I could see on her face were the words *Resistance is futile*.

"Uh, y-yeah, sure…" I crumbled instantly.

She nodded, still smiling.

"But I noticed you said seven photos, not five this week…"

"That's right."

"Meaning you want me to work on the weekend…"

"Of course." A huge grin still covered her face.

"*Whew*…okay!"

I couldn't help sighing, but I still switched to a peppy response midsigh. For nanashi, a man of his word, there was nothing for it but to complete the assignment.

Earlier, she'd talked about resting and taking time to think, but this week was shaping up to be super busy, thanks to her.

* * *

So there I was, standing in front of the library in a daze.

One of the seven photos in my quest was a shot of me with Kikuchi-san. I hadn't noticed at first, because some of the other assignments were more striking, but when I thought about it, this was the only one that required me to take a picture with one other person. This was gonna be tough.

That's why I was standing nervously in front of the library.

If I was going to get this shot, the ideal time would be to stop by the library before changing classes. I could have started with one of the others, but I figured I should go for the tough one while I had the chance.

Plus, I'd been wanting to have a good conversation with Kikuchi-san ever since the conclusion of the Tama-chan incident.

I slowly pushed open the door. A gust of healing air gently

caressed my face; negative ions and plasmaclusters or whatever had nothing on this. Kikuchi-san's healing powers lay beyond the realm of both science and the occult.

She was enshrined delicately in her usual spot.

I slowly approached. When she noticed me, she gave me a gentle smile that embodied love itself, perfecting the scene inside the library.

"Hello."

"Hello."

We greeted each other at almost the same time, and I sat down next to her. I was able to do that totally naturally now, since I'd stopped worrying so much about how close or far from her I should sit. But today, I was super nervous.

"It's so good that things have settled down a bit, don't you think?" she said succinctly. By "things," she definitely meant the Tama-chan situation.

"…Yeah."

This was the first time we'd really talked since then. She'd helped out a lot, and I still hadn't thanked her.

"Hanabi-chan was amazing." She smiled faintly, like morning sunlight melting the snow.

"Yeah, she was." I returned her smile.

She nodded, like morning dew dropping from a leaf. "She had so many barriers in front of her, but she just flew over them," she said warmly. "I think Hanabi-chan always had the strength, but she didn't know how to use her wings."

What a very Kikuchi-san-like metaphor. It made sense, though.

Tama-chan had changed her surface-level behaviors and laid the groundwork to get the class to accept her character. But beneath it all, the underlying foundation was made from the strength she always had.

And that's the dream, isn't it? To be accepted without changing who you are at heart.

"Yeah…and because she was so strong, once she learned to fly, I think she became completely free."

Kikuchi-san smiled happily at my continuation of her metaphor. "…Exactly."

I smiled back at her. "Thank you again for all your help… It really meant a lot."

She shook her head slowly. "No, it was nothing. If you ever

need anything in the future, I'd be happy to help."

"Okay, thanks."

"…Although, there's not much I can do."

"That's not true." I contradicted her modesty with as much sincerity as I could. I mean, she really had saved us.

Tama-chan's heart had been shut tight to the world, and there was no question that Kikuchi-san's words played a big role in opening it up.

"Just hearing you talk about your perspective opened her eyes to a lot of things," I said.

"…Did it, really?"

"It did! That's why I know I can count on you in the future."

She nodded slightly as a blush crept up her face, then she looked up at me. "All right… Let me know whatever you need."

The gentle, gradient shades of her white skin, faintly flushed cheeks, and mysteriously tinted eyes enchanted me like the northern lights, touching my retinas with a whole rainbow of colors. My brain, unable to process her overwhelming beauty, flickered like an old TV as my heart thumped wildly.

"O-okay… Thanks. I will."

"O-okay."

We both fell silent, and time ticked awkwardly on. The books around us seemed to grow a little warmer under this restless, yet gentle and comfortable atmosphere.

"…But…"

"Huh?"

Kikuchi-san's expression as she broke the silence was strangely solemn.

"I wish I knew what Hinami-san was thinking that day," she said.

"…Uh-huh."

"Something about it seemed so wrong…"

She was talking about Hinami's showdown with Konno. To most of our classmates, Hinami had probably looked like the perfect heroine. Her performance was almost flawless.

"Wrong…?"

But her cunning still showed through, just a little.

She hadn't been able to fully hide the cunning of the demon queen.

Mizusawa had sensed it, and so had Tama-chan. And

apparently, Kikuchi-san, too, given she'd been interested in Hinami's motivations the whole time.

"I don't know how much of that Hinami planned out, or what she was trying to do. I'm not even sure if it's all right to ask you about it."

"…Uh-huh."

As someone who knew the truth, I was grateful she wasn't taking this anywhere more specific.

I didn't want to lie or hide anything if she asked me a question.

"But—if what I think is right…," she said, getting deeper into the topic. "Then the question that bothers me is why she decided to go that far."

"…Yeah, I know what you mean." I wondered the same thing.

Why on Earth didn't she stop when she'd won?

"I think she just couldn't accept something about that situation."

"…Maybe so."

I was impressed by how close Kikuchi-san was to the truth.

Hinami had said the exact same thing that morning.

"…There are some things even I can't accept."

Kikuchi-san really did seem to be able to see things no one else could.

"When people get angry, I think it's usually because the situation isn't what they think it ought to be. On that day, the situation had diverged so far, she simply couldn't bear to leave as it was."

"The way they think things should be…"

"Yes." She nodded.

I thought for a moment, but I couldn't say for sure one way or another.

Still, if I was to borrow Kikuchi-san's words, I think I could call what she was describing Hinami's "ideal."

"I wonder what that is for her." I could only answer in the vaguest terms.

"So you don't know, either…"

"…No."

I didn't.

I felt close to Hinami sometimes, but in fact—I knew nothing about her.

That was exactly why I said what I did in front of the shoe

cabinet that day.

When Mizusawa asked me what I thought of Hinami, I'd answered like this:

"I think I want to see who she really is."

"Oh right…" Kikuchi-san seemed to have remembered something.

"What?"

"If you don't mind, there's something I want you to see…"

"Really?"

She touched her finger to her cheek shyly, looking away. "I… wrote a new book. I thought…" The words trailed off, fading like sound in a dense forest. But that only made them all the more mysterious, and the unspoken request reached my heart like an enchantment.

"Oh yeah, I'd love to."

"Th-thank you…," she said in a barely audible voice, her face flushed bright red. I wondered a little why she'd suddenly remembered at that exact point in time, but when she gave me that look, my brain basically stopped working.

"W-well, next time…I'll bring it."

"O-okay."

"Okay, bye!"

She bowed deeply and then disappeared out through the library door. The image of her receding into the distance was even prettier than usual, but I was in too much of a daze to file it away in my memory. I'd completely failed at my photo quest. No—that holy atmosphere made it impossible. If I took a photo in there, I bet it would come out filled with fairies and elves.

* * *

After school, I met with Hinami and explained that I hadn't taken my photo for the day. She brushed it off casually. "Sounds like you didn't really have a chance to get out your phone."

When I thought about it, I realized that aside from the shot of me and Kikuchi-san, I'd probably have to get all the others after school or on the weekend. Most of them had to be taken while I was hanging out with someone.

Hinami said it would be fine to take them after school and then

show them to her the following morning.

With that in mind, I finished the meeting in a hurry and rushed back to the classroom. I had to figure out a way to walk to the station with Nakamura's group and stop somewhere on the way.

When I got to the classroom, they were still talking by the back windows. Close call. If they'd already left, today's mission would almost certainly have failed. Starting the next day, it would probably be a good idea to skip the after-school meetings if I could.

"Hey."

I walked casually toward them, making a conscious effort to look like I belonged. The three of them returned my greeting without any real reaction, accepting me into their circle like it was the most normal thing in the world. It was a little thing, but I couldn't help feeling happy about it.

Suddenly, I noticed something.

"So…you guys don't have practice today?" I asked as naturally as I could.

Mizusawa didn't belong to any sports teams as far as I knew, but I was pretty sure Nakamura and Takei both played soccer.

"Yeah, I quit after the rookie match the other day," Nakamura answered gruffly.

"Oh yeah?"

He nodded, and Mizusawa stepped in to explain.

"Some of the guys said they'll be playing till the end of the year, but since it looks like the team won't make it to the prefectural playoffs, most of them are quitting now."

"We're supposed to focus on test prep, so we can't play in any tournaments next year!!" Takei sounded extremely disappointed about that.

"Huh," I said, then realized something else. "…So what about Hinami?" She was still attending morning track practice, and I think she was going after school, too.

Nakamura waved his hand dismissively. "She's her own thing. She went to the big interscholastic meet this year, and I bet she'll keep going to meets next year, too," he said.

"Yeah, everyone thinks she'll win some medals."

"O-oh…"

When you take an objective look at Hinami, it's honestly hard to believe she's real. She even gets special treatment at school. Well, I guess if she does well at track, it's a good advertisement for

attracting new kids to the team.

The four of us picked up our bags and exchanged casual glances.

"Let's get going," Nakamura said, and we left the classroom. They were acting like I was a regular member of the group, and it made me nervous.

* * *

I was starting to get really anxious now.

On the way to the station, I'd been planning to find a good moment to stop somewhere and nab the shot of me with Nakamura and Takei, but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

Because…

…we'd just walked by the arcade the four of us often went to hang out at.

There was a diner near there, too, and a couple of other places, but we'd passed every single one of them. The only thing left ahead of us was the station. In other words, if I didn't do something, we'd all just go home.

But actually, it made sense. It wasn't like we stopped somewhere every time we walked to the station together. Before I steered us toward taking a picture, someone needed to suggest we go somewhere.

But that didn't seem likely to happen. And that meant I'd have to do it myself. *Ah, I get it now, Hinami. This was actually an all-around training assignment.*

I took a deep breath. "You guys wanna stop by the arcade?"

I'd never made a casual invitation like that before. It was embarrassing, and surprisingly nerve-racking.

"I'm too burned-out today," Nakamura said, like that settled the matter. *Seriously? That happens?* I was shocked. Since I'd never invited them to hang out before, I didn't account for this possibility.

But what to do about it? If we went home now, I wouldn't be able to complete the day's assignment. I had to hold my ground somehow.

"Come on, let's just go!"

"…Huh? What's with you today?" Nakamura looked at me suspiciously. I'd never even made a suggestion before, and now I

was being weirdly persistent about it.

But as a gamer, the key thing right now was to do everything I could to complete the assignment given to me. That meant I had to negotiate. Mizusawa and Takei weren't saying anything, so if I could just manage to convince Nakamura, we'd probably all end up going.

So if I used the fact that Nakamura hated to lose…

"What, you scared of losing to me again?" I said theatrically. *There, that should get a reaction out of him.*

"…Dude, come on."

But Nakamura just looked at me pityingly, like this whole conversation was a waste of his time. *Huh? It didn't work?* I felt like I was running in circles—like my feet were sliding out from under me.

"I—I did beat you at *Dogfight 4*…"

"I know that…"

My desperate attempt to explain myself was in vain. Nakamura was still giving me that weird look. *Shit, I messed that one up.* Now everything was weird. How stupid of me to take on a normie superboss in conversational combat. Trying out new stuff always has risks.

"Heh-heh, you really are funny."

Now Mizusawa was teasing me, too. *Damn it. Why was this happening?*

Nakamura gave me a confused look. Then he sighed. "Whatever. If you want to go that bad, then fine."

"Satisfied, Fumiya?"

"Whoo-hoo, let's go!"

"…Uh, okay…"

So they ended up going to the game center with me out of pity. Well, all's well that ends well, so I'll take that as a win.

* * *

The four of us were inside the arcade, playing a music game I'd just started practicing.

"Ouch…"

"Man…"

Nakamura and I were in 1v1 mode, and the battle was intense.

Nakamura had said he was “pretty badass” at the game, so I had assumed I might lose, but after practicing once a week or so, I was giving him a run for his money. It was probably because gamers and nongamers don’t always use the same words to mean the same thing. To me, *just started practicing* meant I’d been working on it for about two months, but that probably came across differently to Nakamura. Meanwhile, he’d started showing up on the ranking lists at the game center, but he was still weak. In my book, *badass* was a term reserved for the best players in Japan.

“Yesss!”

In the end, I beat him by the skin of my teeth.

“Shit!” Nakamura said, standing up and taking a swig of soda. For someone who didn’t want to go to the game center in the first place, he sure was getting into this.

“Hey,” Mizusawa said casually. “Wanna take a break?”

Nakamura clicked his tongue in annoyance. Yikes.

“Ha-ha-ha. So, Shuji, thoughts on the school festival?” Mizusawa asked.

Nakamura frowned. “Huh?”

“The organizing committee and stuff.”

“Oh.”

“You’re gonna do it, right?!”

Nakamura sounded like he couldn’t care less, Mizusawa was as cool and collected as usual, and only Takei was super excited—or so I thought.

Nakamura grinned and scratched his neck. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not really, huh?”

Mizusawa and Nakamura nodded at each other. Hmm. That was surprising.

Apparently, all three of them were into it, actually.

Mizusawa looked at me. “What about you, Fumiya? You’re joining too, right?”

“Huh?”

“The committee. You in?”

“Uh, o-okay.”

I nodded, swept away by the momentum. That was pure Mizusawa—his way of speaking seemed so casual but was actually quite aggressive. Well, I didn’t have any reason not to run for the organizing committee other than fear, and I had a feeling Hinami

was going to tell me to do it anyway.

"Wonder which girls are gonna run!" Takei said eagerly.

After thinking for a few seconds, Mizusawa said, "Erika and her crew will probably ignore the festival completely, so I'm guessing Mimimi and her friends?"

Nakamura nodded. "Yeah, probably."

Huh. So normies had different stances toward the festival depending on their group. I'd noticed the same thing with the sports tournament. Some, like Nakamura's and Hinami's groups, got really involved, while others, like Konno's group, avoided it completely.

Nakamura sat down next to me again. "Okay, Tomozaki, one more game."

"Good. I've been waiting," I said cheerfully. By this time, Nakamura was able to put up a real fight, so playing him was fairly fun. Damn, I was getting so caught up in this that I almost forgot about taking the picture. I had to start strategizing.

But instead, I got lost in the game again, pushing the five buttons in time with the rhythm of the music.

If I knew this was going to happen, I would have practiced more. Honestly, I'd just gotten in a few rounds here and there between other games. I was hardly at a level I could feel proud of.

Nakamura won that match.

"Got 'em! ♪"

He was obviously pleased with himself.

Shit, that sucked. I wanted to play another round. I'd crush him next time for sure… *Uh, wait a second. Is this my chance?* Since he was in a good mood, he was probably more likely to say yes if I asked for a photo. Maybe I'd lost the battle to win the war. When you lack the skill to make the moment, you've gotta seize the opportunity when it comes. I couldn't let it slip by.

With those thoughts in mind, I turned to Nakamura. "Hey, wanna take a picture to celebrate?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, that was a great game. And…I was thinking of starting an Instagram?"

In the middle of my explanation, I realized it made no sense, so I scrambled to come up with something more convincing.

"No way, Tomozaki's got an Insta?"

"Uh, um, yeah."

"Yeah. Whatever, fine." He seemed slightly suspicious, but at

least he said yes. Now I just had to get Takei in with us, but I had a feeling…

"Takei, wanna get in the picture?"

"For sure!!"

…Yeah, that wasn't hard at all.

I opened up the camera app, which I'd learned how to use when I got the assignment, and took the shot.

"Okay!"

Beaming happily, I put my phone away. Assignment complete.

But for some reason, Mizusawa was giving me a confused look. I made eye contact, and he smiled cynically.

"Most people don't want to take a photo in front of the results screen after they lost…"

I glanced behind me and saw "YOU LOSE" in huge letters on the screen. No way, I just took a picture with that behind us?

I checked the photo on my phone.

"…No, it's fine."

"What's fine?" Mizusawa said, unconvinced. I showed him the photo.

"You can't read the words, so it's all good."

The picture pulled up on the screen was so blurry, you couldn't even tell what the words said. Behold, my nonnormie photography skills. Guess I lost that round.

"Oh. Okay."

Mizusawa gave me a pitying look. Figures. Our faces were totally blurred, too. Hopefully, a certain someone would be understanding…

* * *

The next day was Wednesday. When I showed Hinami the picture at our morning meeting, her reaction was…mixed, shall we say?

"This is really blurry…"

"…Yeah, I know…"

Of course she would point that out. As I searched for the right words, she sighed.

"Well, you technically passed the assignment…but I never guessed I'd be critiquing your photography skills…or lack thereof."

"Uh, is it really that bad?"

She nodded. "I mean, I told you yesterday—you're taking these photos to post on Instagram. Even if people can see you're with Nakamura and Takei, is this really something you want to show them?"

"Um, I guess not…"

I'd figured taking the picture was the important part, like in *Pokémon Snap* or something, but as Hinami pointed out, I was going to show these to people. Just taking any old photo wasn't enough.

"It's fine to have one or two crappy pictures, though, since only people you know will be able to see it. Just be more careful from here on out."

"O-okay…," I said dejectedly.

Hinami briskly moved onto the next subject. "Okay, then why don't we get it started right now?"

"Get what started?"

"Can't you guess?"

She tapped her phone with her fingernail. Oh right. The photo was supposed to go on Instagram.

"You mean my account?"

Hinami replied by showing me her phone. A note with the word "Hexactly" was displayed on the screen.

"Wow, you're really dedicated to your catchphrase."

Here at last, a silent *Hexactly*.

"Just go ahead and create a normal account," she said, ignoring my joke. What was with her?

"…Um, is there anything I need to be careful of? Like my username or account name or profile pic?"

Hinami nodded. "Well, you should probably give a little thought to the profile, but for now, you can just use that blurry shot of the three of you."

"I-is it okay to use a bad picture?"

"People will still be able to tell who everyone is. The blurriness might work nicely for a pfp, and it's not like you have any other photos, right?"

"Um, no…"

Photos of me looking happy basically didn't exist, aside from maybe a couple that Takei took on the overnight trip.

"Well, if you make that your pfp and use it as your first post, I'll consider the first assignment of your photo quest complete."

"Okay, I'll do it right now." I downloaded the Instagram app and created an account.

"While you're doing that, I'm gonna tell you something."

"What's up?"

"I've got a new assignment for you that you can only do now," she said very casually. "Think you can handle both at once?"

"Uh…what?"

I looked up. She was staring at me with an expression that said, *Isn't it obvious?*

"What?" she said.

"N-nothing, I just thought I was supposed to be taking time to examine my feelings this week."

Instead, I felt like I was about to collapse under the weight of all these assignments.

She nodded, drawing her eyebrows together. "That's true, but preparation for the school festival is about to start. It only happens once a year, and it's your best chance to deepen your relationships with the other people involved. It may be challenging, but you can't let this opportunity pass you by."

"Yeah, I guess you're right…"

After all, *school festival* had a strong association with *normie*. I had no idea how exactly it was going to help me make friends, but it was such a classic event that I couldn't help agreeing that it had to be a good opportunity.

I had a feeling I knew what the extra assignment was.

"So what do you want me to do?"

“Today, during long homeroom, we’ll probably choose the organizing-committee members. I want you to volunteer.”

“That’s what I thought…” I smirked before continuing. “I was planning on doing that anyway.”

Hinami blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Um, yesterday, when I was with Nakamura and the guys, we all decided to run for the committee.”

“…Wow.” She nodded, looking impressed. “You’ve grown a lot if you’re already diving in headfirst.”

“Uh, thanks.”

Her straightforward compliment made me a little bashful.

“Of course, this is you we’re talking about. I’m sure you were just trying to fit in.”

“Oof…”

Then she followed it up with a direct hit. Alas, Hinami-san, you are correct.

“Well, that’s fine. As long as you don’t bail.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“From what I can tell of the current class mood, I’m guessing all the other candidates will be normies. You’ll be able to collect some EXP, and everyone will see you blending in with these normies. That’s important.”

“Kind of like the social media thing…”

“Correct.” Hinami grinned. “Running for the committee should make your photo quest easier, too. If you’re spending more time together with the relevant parties, you’ll have more chances to get your shots.”

“…So you think Mimimi and Izumi will run, too?”

That would definitely fit with their past behavior…but Mizusawa had said Konno’s group probably weren’t interested in the festival, which made me less sure about Izumi. Of course, none of that changed the fact that Hinami was making me volunteer.

“Yes. So your new assignment is to run for the committee and, once you’re on it, to play an active part in the festival, push your ideas through, and let everyone know you’re there.”

“That sure is a vague assignment.”

Hinami nodded. “If I got any more specific, you’d end up with too many miniassignments. Pointing you in the general right direction is perfect for this.”

“Well, thanks for the slack, I guess.”

Maybe the lack of detail also had to do with the fact that I'd already agreed to run for the committee with Nakamura's group.

Hinami frowned. "Slack? Not exactly. If you slack because the assignment is abstract, you'll fail. You need to be as proactive and involved as possible in all kinds of different situations."

"As proactive as possible…?"

She'd suddenly raised the bar way higher. Damn, I shouldn't have used that word. Should have let sleeping dogs lie…

"Um, okay…," I said dejectedly.

Hinami gave a satisfied smile. *Goddammit. I think she might be increasing the difficulty level of these assignments until she sees me acting depressed. Better watch out for that next time.*

"Oh, I almost forgot. Make sure you give everyone your Instagram info."

"I guess if I'm taking the trouble to make it…"

I was nervous people would think I was getting full of myself, but I guess these days, everyone is on social media, so it's no big deal. Plus, I'd already mentioned it to Nakamura's gang.

"All right, keep your nose to the grindstone."

"So even you're admitting it's a grind…"

And so another assignment-packed day began.

* * *

In the morning, I shared my Instagram account with Nakamura, Mizusawa, and Takei, and then in the afternoon, we had long homeroom.

"Okay, everyone, like I told you before, we're going to put together the organizing committee for the school festival today."

It had begun. The selection of committee members—and my second assignment.

Kawamura-sensei stood in front of the podium, looking out at the class. "Ideally, we'll want a few girls and a few guys. Let's start with the guys. Anyone want to volunteer?"

"Me!!"

To no one's surprise, Takei shot his hand into the air as if by reflex. The class snickered. He brought peace wherever he went. He was a maestro, in a way.

But now I had to volunteer, too. Better do it before anyone else

did, if I had to do it either way.

I also thought it would be a little sketchy to raise my hand after Nakamura and Mizusawa, so I glanced around and timidly raised my hand. Nakamura and Mizusawa raised theirs at about the same time. All eyes were on us. I wondered what everyone was thinking about me right then.

"Okay, so we've got Takei, Tomozaki, Nakamura, and Mizusawa."

"Yeah!!" Takei whooped.

Mission successful, I guess?

"Shut up, Takei," Nakamura shot back with withering annoyance. Everyone snickered again. Amazing how they got a positive response from such a tiny exchange. Guess they saw it as a little in-joke between the members of the top-tier group.

"Is that it for the boys? Anyone else interested?"

No one else raised their hand. It would take quite a bit of courage to jump into the middle of a group of four who had obviously decided beforehand to volunteer together. Although, with a loser like me in the group, they really didn't have to be intimidated.

"All right, then these four it is," Kawamura-sensei said, writing our names on the blackboard. "And now the girls. Any volunte—?"

"Me, me!"

Mimimi, the self-appointed class cheerleader, excitedly raised her hand before Kawamura-sensei even finished talking. That was fairly predictable, too. *Her shtick is kinda similar to Takei's. Does that bother her, I wonder…?*

"Ha-ha-ha. Nanami is our first candidate. Who else?"

"Tama!! Run the festival with me!!" Mimimi stretched out her hands toward Tama-chan, who looked back at her as seriously as ever.

"Nah. I don't want to."

The whole class giggled at her cut-and-dried answer.

"What? Aww, you're so mean, Tama!"

The laughter grew with Mimimi's heartbroken theatrics.

I had huge admiration for Mimimi's ability to make everything bright and cheerful—but I also noticed that something about their exchange was very different from before.

The timing of the laughter.

In the past, when Mimimi and Tama did their routine, it was

always Mimimi who got everyone laughing.

Or to put it more accurately, Mimimi would notice that Tama-chan's directness was making things awkward, then step in and rescue her by making it part of a joke. That was how it worked.

But this time, it was different.

Everyone started giggling as soon as Tama-chan said, *"Nah."* They didn't need Mimimi's comeback.

This little exchange was a quiet reminder that Tama-chan really had found a place in the class, as herself.

"Too bad, Nanami. Anyone else?"

"Aoi!" Mimimi tearfully sought Hinami's help.

Hinami put on a blank face. "Nah. I don't want to, either," she said in a near-perfect imitation of Tama-chan.

Everyone lost it.

Classic Hinami. Her joke was so simple, even I could have guessed it would get a laugh. She was quick.

"Hey! Once was enough to break my heart, geez!"

Now the class was really laughing. Mimimi had set off a triple-jump routine to get everyone in a good mood. So that was how good communicators played off each other. They left me in the dust.

"Ah-ha-ha. But seriously, I have a lot of work as student council president."

"Yeah, that's fair." Mimimi gave in supportively.

"Very true. She's not allowed to do both jobs at once. So anyone else?"

As Kawamura-sensei looked around the class, a sporty girl who was friends with Mimimi raised her hand.

"Okay, I'll do it."

"Thanks, Yuki!"

"Me too!"

With that, two of her friends had volunteered for the committee. Mimimi was genuinely popular.

"Um…me too!"

Just then, Izumi raised her hand a little bit hesitantly, as if she'd made up her mind to do something hard. *So she did end up volunteering.*

I hadn't expected her to get very involved since Konno wasn't interested in the festival…but now I wasn't sure.

I looked over at Konno. She was sitting with her cheek in her

hand, letting everyone know she was completely unmoved by the fact that Izumi had volunteered. Man, was she scary. As the only member of that clique to have raised her hand, I was sure Izumi must be thinking something right now. She said during the sports tournament that she was the type who really gets into these events, and I guess it was true this time, too. Or maybe she volunteered because Nakamura was on the committee?

"Great, so we have four girls. Is that it?"

No one else raised their hand.

"I'm writing these names down, then."

Well, that was quick and painless.

On the guy's side, we had the normie trio of Nakamura, Mizusawa, and Takei, plus me, a frequent add-on to the group who was slowly integrating. From the outside, I probably looked out of place, but I didn't actually feel that uncomfortable.

On the girl's side, there was Mimimi and two girls from a group she was friendly with, plus Izumi. Even though Mimimi and Izumi belonged to different main groups, they got along, and the four of them were appropriately normie-ish.

The overall impression was definitely a bunch of normies plus me, but I didn't think it would be that difficult to navigate among the individual members. And if this was my mindset, my position must have improved somewhat. Well, the people Hinami had told me to make friends with were all standout members of the class. Blending in with them meant I'd look like a pseudonormie myself. And honestly, I was happy about that.

"Okay, then it's decided. I'm counting on you guys," Kawamura-sensei said flatly, turning to us. Mimimi and Takei looked at each other.

"Leave it…"

"…To us!"

They both punched their fists toward the ceiling. They were really in tune. *With these two involved, I bet we're all gonna get really into this. Wonder if I'll be able to keep up…*

* * *

The eight of us newly selected committee members were standing in front of the blackboard.

As soon as the committee was decided, we had segued right into making decisions for the festival, so we were asking for input from the class.

Meaning I had to stand up there in front of everyone, actively talking and pushing through my opinions. I'd had an assignment on that last part before, but doing it in front of everyone was different.

According to Kawamura-sensei, the festival was basically going to be the same as last year—class booths, programs by the organizing committee and by after-school clubs, skits by volunteers, stuff like that. But since I didn't remember anything from last year, it was all brand-new to me.

"Okay, everyone, let's start by deciding on our class booth!"

Mimimi planted both her hands on the podium and leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. You could tell from her expression that she was genuinely looking forward to this thing. And from how eager she was to take charge. It's nice how easy she is to read.

So we were starting with the class booth. It was going to be tough to push through an opinion on this one, but I had to try. At least I'd been thinking about my strategy ever since Hinami gave me the assignment in the morning. What kind of ideas had the highest chance of being accepted? How should I defend them? Since it wasn't likely anyone else had given that much serious thought to this, just coming in with a solid plan should give me a definite advantage. *Bring it on.*

"Does anyone have an idea?" Mimimi asked.

A smattering of hands went up.

"A haunted house!"

"A *takoyaki* stall!"

"How about a shooting range or a ring toss?"

"A treasure hunt!"

"I want to do a café!"

"A batting cage!"

One of the girls from Mimimi's group wrote down the list of typical school-festival-booth ideas on the blackboard. Every time a student suggested something, Takei let us know what he thought of it ("Great idea!" or "Huh, really?"). Even though he had no special right to finalize the decision, the ones he didn't approve of somehow seemed less likely to succeed. Behold, the simple power of a loud voice.

Everyone was getting really excited, and kids were pulling out

their phones to look up ideas for booths. Interesting. The school festival seemed to bring out a normie-ish level of enthusiasm in everyone.

Now the question was, how should I act in this kind of mood? What should I do to make sure my idea was chosen?

I weighed what I could and couldn't do, then made up my mind.

I turned to Mimimi, who was pretty much leading the discussion.

"We've got a lot of ideas, so now maybe we should ask everyone to give more details about what they want to do."

"What kind of details?"

Since Mimimi had responded to me, most of the class was now at least partially listening to our conversation. This was probably the best way to get my idea across to the maximum number of people. Ideally, I would have faced the class and said the same thing in a loud voice, but that was just too hard for me.

Still, all the attention was more stressful than I'd expected. I felt my breathing getting shallower and my brain slowing to a crawl. What was wrong with me?

"Um, I mean, if someone wants to do a haunted house, what's their concept? If they want to do a café, what kind of food do they want to serve?"

I tried to ignore the fact that everyone was looking at me and speak to Mimimi as naturally as possible. But since my goal was for everyone to hear me, I also had to talk a little louder than normal.

"Oh, I get it! Those kinds of details!"

"Yeah." The aim of my suggestion was both to make voting easier and to steer the conversation toward the plan I'd come up with.

As we were talking, Mizusawa smoothly joined in. "Good idea; let's do that. Okay, guys, tell us what kind of haunted house you want to do, or whatever," he asked the class.

He didn't sound stressed-out at all. That mysterious casualness was his hallmark. He always seemed so at ease. I think that was the secret to popularity that Hinami had told me about.

"If we do a haunted house, I want to make it like the one at Fuji-Q Highland!"

"Uh, is that even possible?"

"That place is supposed to be *terrifying*."

“Wouldn’t we have to use sounds and stuff?”

The discussion was picking up now.

“If we do a *takoyaki* stall, couldn’t we do minicakes, too?”

“We could use pancake mix…”

The ideas were coming into focus, so it was time for me to add mine to the mix.

“Actually, I have an idea, too…”

“Oh, cool. What is it?” Mizusawa asked.

Once again, since we were semi-authority figures up at the front, even a tiny exchange drew all eyes. *Wow, I am getting major EXP right now.*

Despite my insane levels of anxiety, I decided to go ahead and suggest the idea I’d been considering since this morning. I had a lot of faith in it, as I’d given it a fair amount of thought.

“Um, if we do a café…what if we had a bunch of manga there that people could read, like a manga café?”

There was a short pause, and then Mizusawa laughed a little. “…Huh. That’s pretty good.”

Some of my tension drained away, and I felt relaxed enough to get a little cocky. “I know, right?”

“So everyone could donate manga they had lying around?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

As I talked with Mizusawa, the details started coming into focus. Everyone could hear us, and since they were already warmed up from the discussion earlier, some people started chiming in enthusiastically. “I’ll bring *Kingdom*!” someone said.

Nice. My idea was striking a chord.

It didn’t get a lot of points for originality, but it was designed to influence a big group.

People would not only be able to bring their own manga, but they could read whichever other ones they wanted, so a big portion of the class latched onto the idea. On top of that, I’d only added a single element to the typical school-festival café booth, which should make it easier to win over our teacher. She didn’t have any real grounds to veto the idea, and she wasn’t really the type who would, so we didn’t experience any opposition from her.

In other words, I was showing how my idea was the best for all involved and persuading the most powerful person present. It was a simplified version of what I’d done when Mimimi ran for student council president. It’s a gaming basic—figure out your core strategy

and re-create it whenever necessary.

"That's great! Anyone have any other ideas?" Mimimi asked the class.

A few more people gave their suggestions. Everyone seemed to be having fun. It was probably like this last year, too, but I didn't remember. I was completely uninvolved with any of it.

Once we'd talked through all the ideas, we transitioned into voting.

"Okay, guys, time to make a decision!" Mimimi announced enthusiastically. "Who wants the haunted house?"

A few hands went up.

"One, two, three…"

Izumi, who was standing next to Mimimi, earnestly counted them up. She was so sincere about everything, even tallying votes—I think you could say it was her defining characteristic. Her eyebrows were even scrunched together.

"Five votes! Okay, next…"

The class voted for one idea after the other, and the results were written on the blackboard. So far, the *takoyaki* stall had gotten the most, with eleven votes. I think the popularity was thanks to the normie-ish idea of using pancake mix to make a sweet version to sell alongside the savory octopus balls. Either way, that would be my main rival.

"…Okay! Next is the café! The manga café, that is!"

Finally, it was time to vote on my proposal. The response had been fairly positive, but how would it turn out?

Some hands went up. From a quick glance, my idea seemed to be giving the *takoyaki* stall a run for its money.

"Um…" Izumi carefully counted the hands. "Fourteen!" she announced, holding up four fingers.

"Okay! And since the *takoyaki* stall got eleven votes…" Mimimi drew a big circle around the words *Manga Café* written on the blackboard. "That means the manga café wins!"

A soft round of applause spread through the class.

"Hear that, Fumiya?"

"Uh-huh."

Mizusawa congratulated me casually on my victory. He was so good at that kind of thing.

But wow, that happened quickly. My main assignment was still the after-school photo quest, which made this more of a subquest,

but that didn't change the fact that I had pulled this one off easily. I guess my overall level really was going up, even when it came to little things like this. I mean, when you're the type of guy who skips out on the culture festival to play *Atafami* at home, people don't usually choose your idea for the class booth.

As I stood there quietly reflecting on my own growth, I saw Kawamura-sensei stand up out of the corner of my eye.

"…Well, this booth is definitely in the gray zone. If you're going to do it, I want you to be careful it doesn't become a problem. You especially, Tomozaki, since you're the one who suggested it."

"Uh, um, of course!"

I guess this was my payback for being slightly devious in how I got the teacher's approval. Yeah, grown-ups aren't that dumb. Mizusawa cackled at me.

"Hey, don't laugh at me!" I joked.

"What? I'm not laughing at you."

"Uh, I think you are."

Mizusawa wasn't a normie to me anymore—he was just Mizusawa, which was why I felt comfortable joking around with him.

After that, the class got noisy, and everyone started chatting about the festival with the people sitting near them.

That's when something unexpected happened.

"I'm sorry, Tomozaki-kun," said one of Mimimi's friends. I think her name was Kashiwazaki-san?

She had straight brown hair and an animated personality. She wore makeup and stuff, too, so I got major normie vibes. What was going on? Why was she talking to me all of a sudden?

I was surprised, but I held on to my training as I scrambled for the right reply. Her apology didn't really make sense, since we'd decided by majority vote…

"Um…if you're apologizing, then everyone who raised their hand is guilty of the same crime…"

"Ah-ha-ha, good point."

Kashiwazaki-san giggled and lightly pressed her fingers over her mouth. I wasn't sure if my response had hit right, or if I just sounded like a typical nerd who was talking too fast about a bunch of stuff all at once. But she'd laughed a little, so I couldn't have messed up too bad, right?

"Look at you, Fumiya, talking like a pro," Mizusawa said.

“Th-thanks to you.”

“Oh, your first name is Fumiya?”

Kashiwazaki-san peered into my face. There it was—the mysterious normie disregard for personal space. But I was fine. She wasn’t half as bad as Mimimi and Izumi. Those two were special cases.

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“Ah-ha-ha. You guess?”

Yeah, that was a weird thing to say, and I deserved to be laughed at. But I made sure not to collapse like a wet noodle, standing up straight and sticking my chest out instead. I’d learned over the past six months that when my body was standing at attention, my mind was, too, and I had to take advantage of that when I was in trouble. It was like intentionally starting with a Kabuff in boss fights.

“The only person who ever calls me that is Mizusawa.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Yeah, I might be the only one,” Mizusawa said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, and he started talking to me out of the blue, too.”

So there I was, suddenly having a conversation with Kashiwazaki-san and Mizusawa. I’m still not exactly sure why it happened, but I guess it’s not that unusual for normies to chat with classmates they didn’t already know well. Actually, I’m the weird one for hardly ever doing that in the past.

Kashiwazaki-san was looking at me and Mizusawa with a curious expression.

"You two have been hanging out a lot lately, haven't you?"

"You mean me and Mizusawa?"

I summoned all my confidence and made an intentional effort to take part in the conversation. If I got scared, Mizusawa would take over everything from saying yes or no to introducing new topics. My strategy was to join in a little more than I was comfortable with, which would actually end up as just the right amount. It was a new situation for me, and I wanted to take advantage of it by trying out some new things. Plus, everyone else was distracted by their own conversations, so we weren't exactly the center of attention.

"Yeah! I thought it was a little strange!"

"Oh yeah, I guess," I said, looking at Mizusawa. "When did we start hanging out? Right before summer vacation or something?"

"Sounds about right. I like weirdos, so you know…"

"Are you calling me a weirdo?"

"Ha-ha-ha." Kashiwazaki-san listened to our conversation, smiling brightly. "I think this is the first time I've ever talked to you! Looking forward to working on the committee together!"

"Oh, uh-huh. Me too."

Then Mizusawa just had to butt in. "Hey, by the way, Fumiya just got an Insta. You have one, too, right, Sakura?"

"Yeah!" said Kashiwazaki-san, whose first name was apparently Sakura. "What's your username?" she asked me.

"Uh, um…"

I didn't want to lose my footing, so I made an effort to turn my reply into a real sentence and exchanged account info with Kashiwazaki-san. *Uh, aren't we still in class? Are we gonna get in trouble for doing social media stuff?*

"Wow, this photo sure is blurry!" Kashiwazaki-san peered at my profile photo, smiling.

"I wanted to start an account, but I suck at photography…," I confessed.

She laughed. "Aww, no! You better practice."

"Y-yeah, I will."

With that, our conversation ended. Huh. I didn't understand

why, but I had a new follower on Instagram. Mostly thanks to Mizusawa. But why had she started talking to me all of a sudden? Nothing like that had ever happened to me before.

Kawamura-sensei coughed over the noisy chatter. “Okay, guys, it’s not break time. We need to talk about the program in the gym…”

Suddenly, everyone was focused on her. When you think about it, teachers are constantly the center of attention. My legs turn to jelly when people look at me for one second; adults live in an alternate universe. They’re amazing.

“Any class that wants to can perform something on the stage. Some classes do, and some don’t. What do you guys think?”

I thought back to last year. Now that she mentioned it, I vaguely remembered a bunch of classes did dances, comedy routines, plays, and stuff like that. Given it existed in my memory, the show must have taken place right after the opening ceremony or something. If it had been optional to watch, I wouldn’t have even known it existed.

“Hmm, a performance…,” Mimimi said thoughtfully and looked at us.

So apparently, we got to choose whether or not to do it. But not me. Since my assignment was to actively participate and push through my opinions, I probably was supposed to nudge everyone toward doing a performance. Man, I was acting like one of those people who just couldn’t get enough of the school festival.

I thought for a second and came up with the most efficient strategy.

“What do you think, Takei? Should we just do this thing? After all, it’s our last shot at it.”

“Of course we should do it!!” he shouted.

A tiny spark of enthusiasm on my part was enough to light his fire. Ah, Takei the human megaphone. He took my words and repeated them at full volume to the whole class. Everyone probably assumed it was his idea now, but I’d still said it first, so I figured I was safe in terms of my assignment.

“We might as well!”

“Yeah!”

Kashiwazaki-san and Mimimi’s other friend added their approval. Izumi was nodding, too. Being invested in the festival was quickly becoming the norm for what was “right.” Hinami gave me a

nod as well. *O-okay, bring it on.*

"Everyone, are you okay with doing a performance? Anyone against it?" Mimimi asked the class.

No one spoke up. I mean, it would be really hard to raise your hand and say no by this point. Mimimi probably didn't realize that, but it was practically decided already.

"Yeah, why not?" Nakamura said. He seemed to be on board, if not really following the conversation.

"Right?"

Mizusawa was in, too, and the general mood was coming together in favor of making the most of our last school festival. The top-tier Nakamura had given the final push, and the decision seemed set in stone. I wasn't sure why Nakamura was excited about it, but in some ways, he tended to ride the wave, too.

Mimimi looked around the class and nodded to make it official. "That's that, then! Kawamura-sensei! We'll do it!"

Kawamura-sensei thought for a moment before answering. "In that case, I'd like you to decide what you're doing…but since long homeroom is almost over, let's tackle that part next time."

"Okay! So we'll do something, but we're not sure what yet!" Mimimi said.

No one else said anything, so that concluded the meeting.

Kawamura-sensei nodded. "All right, I think that's it for today's discussion. I'll go over the schedule now…"

The members of the committee went back to our seats to listen to her explanation.

There were a few twists and turns along the way, but I think I completed the general assignment. Doing stuff tends to create new situations, like that mysterious conversation with Kashiwazaki-san. All seemed good for the moment. The photo quest was turning out to be the harder of my two assignments…

* * *

After school that day, the committee members all met up in the small auditorium.

Apparently, four representatives from each class were going to gather in a big group to discuss the festival, and our team included Izumi, Mimimi, Takei, and me. We'd all volunteered for the role.

Aside from me, they were all super into it and seemed right for the job. I volunteered because of my assignment. It's not that I wasn't excited, but let's face it: I'm not cut out for this.

A tall, skinny teacher from another class made an announcement.

"Okay, let's choose the committee chair. Any volunteers?"

Everyone looked at one another.

The chair, huh. Maybe the ideal would have been for me to volunteer, since my job was to be proactive, but that also seemed like a bridge too far. I didn't have the skills to bring everyone together, and in the long term, it seemed like a bad idea to take on the name of chair without really doing the job.

I decided to lie low. Not even Hinami could give me grief for it.

For a few moments, everyone seemed to be waiting to see what would happen.

Then a hand shot into the air, and the teacher looked to see who it was.

"Izumi-san from second-year Class Two, right?"

"Uh, mm-hmm!"

The teacher smiled. "Thanks for volunteering. As long as no one else is interested, we'll go with Izumi-san. Anyone?"

No one stepped forward, so Izumi was named chair.

She nodded as if to confirm the direction she was heading in. I was sure she had her own reasons for taking on the role.

I watched her take that small step forward as the committee meeting moved ahead.

* * *

After the meeting ended, Mimimi, Izumi, Takei, and I were walking down a big hill on the way to the station. When I thought about it, this was an unusual group. We all had individual relationships with one another, but normally, the four of us would never have hung out.

Anyway, we were heading home, but I still hadn't completed my photo quest for the day. I mean, right after school was pretty much the only time I could work on it, which meant I somehow had to accomplish one of the assignments before we split up.

I opened up the message from Hinami that listed the items in

the quest. Given the group I was walking home with, there were… two possibilities.

- Yuzu Izumi eating ice cream
- Minami Nanami eating ramen

Neither one would be easy. This was way too specific. I'd have to intentionally set up the situation for the picture, which in this case meant I had to take the initiative in inviting either Izumi or Mimimi for ice cream or ramen. *Damn it, Hinami, what's "easy" about this assignment?*

What was I supposed to do now? It didn't really matter which one I attempted, but considering I'd have a chance with Mimimi after we got to Kitayono Station, I figured I should try to do the Izumi assignment right then.

"Good luck with your new job, Chairwoman Yuzu!" Mimimi said cheerfully.

"Thanks!"

"You've been doing a lot lately, huh, Yuzucchi?!" Takei said.

"I guess so," she answered, scratching her neck.

Mimimi turned to Takei. "I've been thinking the same thing! She took over as captain in the sports tournament, too!"

"Oh, um…yeah, maybe." Sounding embarrassed, Izumi gave Mimimi a troubled smile.

They were talking about the changes they'd seen in her since the sports tournament and the Nakamura situation. I'd been close to her through the whole thing, but the transformation was so dramatic that even Mimimi and Takei had noticed. Mimimi aside, anything big enough for Takei to notice had to be significant.

"You definitely have! They say people change when they get a boyfriend—do you think that's you?" I was really impressed by how Mimimi was able to subtly balance the teasing with an affectionate tone as she playfully elbowed Izumi. "Huh? Huh?"

"No way!" Izumi said, squirming around.

"Huh? Huh? Huh?" Mimimi escalated her attack, poking Izumi's side over and over. So it was beginning.

"Stop!"

"Hee-hee-hee." Mimimi grinned fearlessly; she was in full silly mode now.

She tickled Izumi faster and faster.

“Come on!”

Izumi’s flexible shoulders and hips writhed, revealing the contours of her body. Her skirt briefly slipped up, the shadow flickering over her thighs, and I caught the scent of vanilla as her hair swung in front of my face. I had to look away from her flushed cheeks and slightly parted lips.

Still having a great time, Mimimi agilely snuck up behind Izumi.

“Boo!”

And then she grabbed Izumi’s huge boobs.

“Eeee?!”

Mimimi sank her fingers into Izumi’s button-down shirt, bunching it up. The sight of her slim white fingers pressing into their victim was kinda hot, both in a sexy way and an embarrassing way.

“Hey!”

But Izumi was the sporty type, too, and she looked over her shoulder, spun out of Mimimi's grasp, and slapped her on the forehead.

"Ooh, you're fast! ♡"

That concluded Mimimi's bizarre little girl-on-girl escapade, and peace returned to the street. What the hell was that about anyway? I was still reeling, and I was only on the sidelines.

It occurred to me to wonder what Takei was doing…and I caught him staring at the two of them with googly eyes. *You follow your heart, dude. I'll give you that.*

Wait a second, I had an assignment to do. I was trying to get a shot of Izumi eating ice cream. So first, I had to…

"Mind if I stop by the convenience store?"

"Sure! What's the Brain want to buy?" Mimimi asked casually, having returned from her alternate universe.

"I could use a snack."

"Yeah, we're going home a little later today than usual."

If we didn't go to the convenience store, the quest was dead in the water. I had no idea how I was going to get Izumi to buy ice cream, but at least this was the first step. But what to do? If I randomly said something like, *Izumi, you should have some ice cream*, she'd get confused and probably tell me to just eat some myself. Hmm.

The four of us went into the store and started wandering around to explore.

I had to create some kind of opening.

"Ooh, this looks good," I said, pointing to a cup of cream-cheese-flavored ice cream. I didn't really care which flavor I chose —and no, the fact that I happened to point to Hinami's favorite kind meant nothing.

Now if Izumi would say something like, *Ooh, ice cream, that sounds good!* and buy one, I could ride the wave of excitement and get a chance to snap a photo, and my assignment would be complete. But would she do that?

Mimimi looked at the ice cream. "Ooh, that does look good! But it's so cold outside…," she said sadly.

She had a point. It was November, after all. Maybe Hinami made ice cream part of the assignment specifically to make this

harder. She does like to make my training hell in every way imaginable; that's something she would do.

"No way, Mimimi, ice cream tastes the best when it's cold out!" Surprisingly, Takei sent out a rescue boat.

"Yeah! You wouldn't think so, but it's true!"

That's the kind of thing normies say, right? I was fighting hard to get everyone to eat ice cream, but Takei was inexplicably all-in on my idea, so the battle actually didn't look that tough.

Unfortunately, Izumi was looking at Takei and me like we were a couple of children she had to take care of.

"You two have nerves of steel." Those were the words of someone who did not intend to eat any ice cream.

"Uh, you don't want any?"

"Nope. Too cold out."

"Oh, okay…"

This was bad. Maybe even checkmate. Now that she'd so clearly said she didn't want any, I couldn't say, *Come on, just try it!* Plus, she was very unlikely to change her mind on her own. Hmm, it was looking like I'd have to put this quest off to another day. I still had another one I could work on, after all.

"Hey, Farm Boy! I'm gonna have some!" I wasn't sure why, but Takei was super excited about this ice cream. Now the mission was truly compromised. "You're getting some, too, right?"

"Uh, yeah…"

Takei and I both bought the cream-cheese flavor.

Then we went outside, and the two of us stood there in the cold eating our ice cream. *What the hell am I doing?*

Now extremely happy, Takei took a picture of us with his phone camera. *Uh, right. As long as someone's having fun.*

"Capture the moment! This is going on Twitter!"

Izumi and Mimimi watched us, smiling. Damn it, I wanted Izumi to eat the ice cream, not Takei, and I wanted the photo on Instagram, not Twitter… This was not going well.

* * *

Having failed at the Izumi ice-cream photo, I attempted my next challenge.

The setting was Kitayono Station, where both Mimimi and I got

off the train to go home.

From this point on, it was just the two of us. I needed to get a picture of Mimimi eating ramen…but why did it have to be ramen? I didn't exactly see Mimimi as a ramen kind of person. Hinami's sadism really shone in her efforts to make everything as difficult as possible.

Actually, like the Izumi ice-cream assignment, she probably intended it as practice for "pushing my opinion through" at the school-festival meetings. She wanted me to push for ramen if I wanted ramen, and ice cream if I wanted ice cream.

"The manga café is gonna be so fun!" Mimimi said excitedly as soon as we were through the ticket gates.

"Yeah," I answered, still ruminating on my assignment. "I wonder what we'll end up doing for the performance…"

"Ah-ha-ha! Yeah, that's the question! We kinda just decided to do it because everyone was feelin' it!"

"What do people usually do? Skits and comedy routines?"

"Yeah. Or, like, dances or songs!"

"Oh, I didn't realize those were okay, too."

I'd ad-libbed a conversation starter, and it was working. Very good, very good.

Dances or songs, huh? If we ended up doing that, I bet Hinami would tell me I had to perform. That was not going to happen. In fact, I wouldn't be able to handle a role in a skit, either.

"I can't wait to see you dance!" Mimimi said jokingly. "Hey, that reminds me, you cracked people up that one time…"

During the election, I'd tried to copy Mimimi's pose, but everyone had laughed at me. My talent level for dancing is zero.

"Uh, no, I don't dance…"

"Well then, how about a comedy routine? You can be the straight man!"

"No, I don't think so. I'm not cut out for the stage," I replied, casually giving up on the whole thing.

Suddenly, Mimimi clapped like inspiration had just struck. "Very true! You're the Brain, after all, and brains gotta brain!"

"…You mean I should do the thinking for the performance?"

I managed to interpret Mimimi's use of *brain*. I swear, it never crosses her mind whether what she says will make sense to anyone else but her.

"Yes, you knew exactly what I meant!"

“Well…by now, I’m used to the random stuff you say when you’re excited.”

“I think we’re totally in tune!”

She grabbed me by the shoulders and leaned her weight on me.

“Hey!”

Her super-normie surprise attack almost knocked me off-balance, but she was unexpectedly light.

“Oof.” I managed to stand up straight again.

“Oh, Brain, you’re stronger than I thought!”

“No, it’s just that you’re so light…”

She really was slender, although she still had curves.

Once I cleared my head, I realized this wasn’t a problem of physical balance but of distance. Since she was hanging off my shoulders, her perfect, evenly featured face was right next to my shoulder—right next to my face. I’d regained my physical balance, but my emotional balance was done for.

Our eyes met at close range for a second.

“…”

“…”

A strange silence followed, and you could tell from our wide-eyed expressions that both our brains had stopped working. The depths of Mimimi’s eyes were so clear; I was magnetically drawn in by how beautiful they were, and I normally hate looking people in the eye.

The line of her nose was a perfect downward sweep above her evenly drawn lips. From this new angle, I was reminded once again how incredibly beautiful she was. *Okay, wait.* My face was weirdly hot all of a sudden.

Finally, Mimimi was the first to speak and end those awkward seconds of silence. "…Uh, welp, thanks for not saying I'm heavy! Let's get going!"

Without looking me in the eye, she took a few steps forward, waving at me to follow.

"Oh, okay."

I lagged behind her for fifteen or twenty seconds to let my face cool down. I didn't want her to see me blushing.

Eventually, the cold winter wind calmed me down, and I stepped up to her side. Now I had to ask her to go get ramen with me.

But in Kitayono, instead of going to a ramen shop…

"Uh, Mimimi?"

"Yeah?"

"Wanna go to Manshu Pot-Sticker Palace?"

It wasn't exactly the kind of place to take such a beautiful high-school girl to, but I had no other choice. It was the only place I knew of around here that served ramen. And it definitely met the one and only standard for nonnormie restaurant reviews: Would I feel okay going there by myself?

"Right now?"

"Yeah. I'm still a little hungry."

For some reason, Mimimi smirked. "Well, I'm a little hungry, too, but…"

"What?"

"Are you going through a growth spurt or something?"

"A growth spurt?"

Mimimi nodded. "I mean, you just had ice cream, and now you want ramen."

"…Oh."

She had a point. I must be coming off like a real glutton.

I anxiously searched for an excuse. "No, it's just…sometimes, when I start eating, it makes me want to eat more."

"Oh, I definitely get that!"

She seemed convinced by my excuse. And I really did feel hungrier after eating that ice cream. Saved by my stomach.

"Okay, I'm in!"

She waved her hands excitedly at me and started marching forward.

"Wait a second," I said, cutting her off. "Mimimi. Wrong direction."

"Seriously?"

Yeah, she really does everything by feel.

* * *

As soon as we got to Manshu Pot-Sticker Palace, I ran into a hiccup.

After I ordered ramen, Mimimi turned to the waiter.

"I'll have the pot-sticker set!"

Yeah. I took her to a place that serves all kinds of Chinese food, so of course she ordered the pot stickers. Not her fault, obviously—I'm the idiot here. I mean, the restaurant is literally called Pot-Sticker Palace.

Now what should I do? All that courage I expended inviting her here would go to waste if I didn't do something quick.

Mimimi gulped down some water. Who drinks water that enthusiastically? "Well, this is unusual, you inviting me somewhere!" she teased, grinning at me.

"Um, well…yeah."

I'd never have the courage to do it if it wasn't for an assignment. I mean, yeah, we were just stopping by on the way home, but was it normal for a guy and a girl to go somewhere together like this? Was she going to read too much into it? Or maybe not. She didn't waffle that much before saying yes, so maybe it wasn't a big deal. I had no idea.

"I think this might have been my first time. Inviting someone to get a bite to eat on the way home from school, I mean."

"…No way!" Her response came just a little too late. *Huh? Did I say something weird?*

She tipped her empty glass to the side, clanking the ice around.

"So…why'd you decide to do it now?"

"Huh? Uh…"

I scrambled for an answer as she watched me intently. Why did

I invite her? If I told her the truth, I'd have to say, *Well, I wanted to take a picture of you eating ramen so I could post it on my Instagram account*, which was so awful, I'd have to be exiled from Japan for admitting it. That was out.

And I was bad at lying on the fly, so I had to find a way to just smooth it over.

"Uh, well…ramen," I mumbled.

Mimimi burst out laughing. "You wanted to eat ramen that badly?!"

All I'd done was murmur one word, and her super-normie special skill, Auto-Conversation Completion, had kicked into action, completing my alibi. *Okay, Mimimi, let's go with that.*

I contented myself with her explanation. "…Yeah. I was just dying for ramen."

"Uh-oh, think just one bowl will be enough?"

"Of course, I couldn't finish two!"

She was kind enough to laugh at my dumb response. That was Mimimi. She let you know making other people happy made her happy, so talking to her was super low stress.

Anyway, back to my assignment. Since she'd ordered the pot-sticker set, I wouldn't be able to get the photo if our meal went along as normal.

What to do…? Well, I knew what to do. There was only one option left.

After we chatted for a while, the waiter brought our orders to the table at just about the same time.

My one remaining option. This was it.

"Oh, wow, this is amazing!" I began by letting her know how good my ramen was as soon as we started eating.

"For real?!" She latched right on.

"For real! Um, want a bite?"

Okay, so it was a really simple strategy. The plan was to get her to take a bite of my ramen and then snap her picture. Honestly speaking, the "indirect kiss" thing or whatever was kind of touchy for a bottom-tier character like me, but Hinami had called me immature in the past for worrying about it. Maybe it wasn't a big deal after all. I might struggle internally, but I could handle that.

But again, Mimimi's response to my casual question came a beat too late. "Uh, um, really?"

For some reason, she looked unsure. *Huh? What just happened to*

the mood?

"Uh, yeah, just a bite," I repeated.

Very quietly, I heard her mumble, "Huh?"

"What?"

"Am I worrying too much?"

"A-about what?"

"…Nothing, never mind! Okay, I'll have a bite!"

She grabbed my bowl with both hands, pulled it toward her, and started to slurp it down. *Why is she so fast? Crap, photo, photo!*

I grabbed my phone, which I'd set on the table to be ready for moments like this, speedily opened the camera, and snapped a photo of Mimimi.

But I was in such a panic, I left my finger on the button too long, and it started taking a bunch of consecutive shots. *Snap-snap-snap-snap-snap-snap!*

"Hey! Why are you taking so many pictures of me?!"

"Agh, I screwed this up!"

"Screwed what up?!"

"Nothing, just…!"

Suddenly, everything was chaos, but my assignment was complete. Now the only question was how well I could explain myself to Mimimi, which was a very real problem.

"I—I mean, you looked like you were gonna eat a ton!"

"So you took my picture?!"

"Y-yeah, as evidence!"

"Come on, how obsessed are you?!"

"It's, y'know, my growth spurt!"

I was making my reputation as a glutton a lot worse, but I think I escaped by the skin of my teeth. Actually, since suddenly taking a picture of someone eating ramen was already kinda sketchy, I'd come up with an excuse in advance. Taking twenty photos instead of one didn't really change my approach. I was screwed from the beginning, so it all worked out. Impressive, right?

"Oh man…" Mimimi smiled and rolled her eyes, pushing my bowl of ramen back toward me. "Here you go," she said.

"Th-thanks."

I peered into the bowl. To tell the truth, it did get to me. If I ate another bite, I was pretty sure it'd be the indirect whatever.

But I'd acted like I didn't care a minute ago, so now I had no choice but to casually dig in.

Mimimi seemed unimpressed. “I still have questions…”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

She pouted for a second, looked down at her pot stickers, and smiled deviously. “Okay, Tomozaki.”

“What?”

I looked up at her. There was a pot sticker in front of my face.

“I’ll give you a bite of mine, too.”

“Uh…”

She suddenly thrust the pot sticker that was held between her chopsticks toward me.

No, no, no, no way!

“What? What’s the matter?”

She was obviously feigning innocence. What was going on? What was she trying to do? This was going way beyond the indirect kiss; this was like…that thing couples do!

As I was trying to figure out what to do, Mimimi said, “Hmm?” and wiggled her food in front of my face. She was staring at me with a peculiarly determined expression. Why the display of iron will? What kind of battle were we in? Why was I feeling so much pressure?

Still, I couldn’t think of a logical reason for refusing her offer, so I tried to suppress my pounding heart and put the whole thing in my mouth. I was fighting to stay calm. But I definitely was not succeeding.

Mimimi kept staring at me. I was staring back at her, because I had no idea what this meant. This was the second time today, too.

It was a really, really weird moment.

Then, a few seconds later, Mimimi looked away before I did and pouted. Why did she seem upset? She shifted her gaze around and blinked a few times, then glared at me again. *Seriously, what is going on?*

“Something’s fishy here!” She threw her napkin at me.

“…Huh? What?”

I was completely confused. Then she started wolfing down her pot stickers like nothing had happened. Now I understood even less. What was this, an eating competition? At that speed, I’d better hurry up myself, or she’d have to wait around for me after she finished. And as a bottom-tier character, that would be rude.

So I started slurping down my ramen as fast as I could. Which then led her to ask, “…Why are you eating so fast, Tomozaki?”

“Huh? …I mean, it’s just…”

“…What?” She sighed, as if she was pleased to see me struggling for an answer. Then, apparently reassured, she smiled kindly. “…You’re such a weirdo.”

For whatever reason, she was satisfied now.

“…Huh?”

If you wanted to talk about weird, then what the heck had Mimimi been doing for the past few minutes?! Yeah, I had no idea what was going on.

* * *

“See you tomorrow!”

“Okay, see you later.”

Mimimi and I parted ways at the usual corner, and I headed home by myself. Man, today was one hell of a roller coaster…

When I got home, I went up to my room, opened my phone, and checked my LINE messages from Hinami.

Now that I’d managed to get the shot of Mimimi eating ramen, I had five assignments left. What would I need to do and with who to finish them? Where should I ask them to go? What excuses should I use to get them to do what I wanted? I was plotting my strategy as well as my F-tier skills would allow.

After all, even a guy at the bottom can get stuff done as long as he has a strategy. I’d learned that lesson plenty of times on past assignments.

For instance, the old me was totally incapable of jump-starting a conversation and tailoring it to who I was with, but when I gave it some thought ahead of time, I was now able to do it in real life. By memorizing conversation topics over and over, I learned how to come up with the topics themselves, and by this point, I was decent at creating them on the fly.

Right now, I couldn’t invite people out and get them to do what I wanted to do. Like, at all. But if I practiced coming up with strategies ahead of time and implementing them, I was fairly sure I’d eventually be able to do it naturally on the spot.

After all, that’s what you do in games—practice your moves in training mode so you can use them in a real match.

Glancing back and forth between my phone and a notebook, I

worked out a strategy for each assignment.

Oh right…

We were already connected on LINE, so if I sent today's picture right now, the next morning meeting should go more smoothly.

I chose one of my many shots of Mimimi eating ramen and sent it to Hinami. Right away, the icon popped up showing she'd read it. She was always on top of her communications.

A minute later, a message arrived from her.

[*Are you only capable of taking blurry photos?*]

I realized then that I'd gotten into continuous shooting mode because I was panicked, which had freaked me out even more, which had probably made my hand shaky. When I looked at the photos again, I discovered a dozen or so shots that were just as blurry as the previous day's.

Um, Hinami-san. I suspect this particular assignment is challenging me for reasons that have nothing to do with normie-ness. Photography is hard, don't you think?

3

Important items are usually lying around in enchanted forests

The next day was Thursday.

Since I'd sent the photo in advance, the morning meeting went smoothly. Hinami listened to me give a rough overview of my conversation with Mimimi, told me to keep up the hard work on both assignments, and let me go. Also, she told me I "have the right attitude," but I didn't really know what that meant.

Later, during the break before we switched classrooms, I went to the library and stood nervously in front of the door again.

Last time, Kikuchi-san had confided in me.

"If you don't mind, there's something I want you to see…"
"I…wrote a new book. I thought…"

Going by that, she was probably going to give me the manuscript today. I was super nervous, but I bet Kikuchi-san was a hundred times more nervous to be showing me what she'd written. I should act as confident as possible—but the sense of having a mission to fulfill just made me more apprehensive.

When I opened the door to the library, I saw Kikuchi-san jump slightly, like a little dog who had just found a bone hidden in the ground. Her anxiety was easy to see.

I walked over to her (well aware that I was walking a little stiffly) and sat down.

"H-hello."

"Um, hello."

Our greeting was a little shakier than usual.

I glanced at her. She was holding an ancient book imprinted with a holy seal in both her hands— Er, no, it was probably the

manuscript she had written.

I waited for her to make a move. Trying to hurry this along was definitely not the way to go.

"Here!!"

Suddenly, she thrust the book at me, speaking at full volume. She looked surprised by how loud she was. Then she went silent again, her lips quivering.

"If it's not too much trouble, w-would you…?"

When I took the pile of papers, she withdrew her hands abruptly. Then she rested them on her skirt, her fingers twined together. A short, awkward silence followed.

"…Y-yeah, of course. You want me to read it and tell you what I think, right?"

"Mm-hmm…," she said, barely audible. She wasn't as put-together as she usually was, her bangs falling loosely over her eyes and partially hiding them. From what I could see, her eyes looked anxious and slightly moist, as fragile as a sandcastle that crumbles at the lightest touch. *Crap, what is going on?* I was feeling strangely protective.

But I couldn't find the right words, so I sat there feeling lost.

"Th…th…th…"

"…Huh?"

Kikuchi-san was stuttering now. "This is the first time!!"

Once again, her voice was at full volume. The only levels available to her right now seemed to be zero or one hundred. Like before, she looked surprised by her own loudness.

"Th-this is the first time I've shown it to anyone, so please go easy on me…"

"Y-yeah, for sure." I nodded slowly, trying not to react awkwardly to Kikuchi-san's obvious nervousness.

Her chair clattered as she got to her feet, even though it was much earlier than she usually left the library.

"O-okay, bye…!"

"Uh, okay. Bye."

With that, she walked away. All I could do was sit there alone as she pattered out of the room.

I felt strangely restless. Part of it was the way she stole my heart like a soft little forest creature, but that wasn't all.

I was curious what secrets the manuscript held within.

* * *

School normally ended after sixth period, but that day, we had a special seventh period to talk about the festival as a whole class. We were right in the middle of the discussion.

Apparently, we would be staying late every day from this point on to get ready for the festival. Things were really gearing up now.

All eight committee members were standing in front of the blackboard.

"Okay, we'll start by deciding on our plans for the performance."

Since Izumi was now chair of the entire organizing committee, she was leading the class discussion instead of Mimimi today. She seemed a little unused to the role, but the nature of her leadership was already taking shape. A testament to her communication skills.

The current item on the docket was our performance in the gym, which we'd decided to take on the other day without any specific plan. What should we do? I had to make some suggestions, but there wasn't anything I was really interested in.

Izumi rested her hands on the podium and leaned forward, addressing the whole class. "Does anyone have an idea?"

"I wanna do a comedy routine!"

The person who raised her hand was a member of the committee—Mimimi. *Geez, she has no sense of restraint.*

"A-a comedy routine? You think we can pull that off?" Izumi asked timidly.

"No problem! Just leave it to me!"

"Um…"

"I'm on it!"

She sounded extremely confident, which was actually a little scary. The rest of the class was giggling. Still, Mimimi loved comedy.

One of the other girls on the committee wrote *comedy routine* on the blackboard, giggling herself.

"Okay, so we have one idea. Anything else?" Izumi asked the class.

A few hands went up, and people suggested skits, a fashion show, and karaoke. *Karaoke? Really?*

I definitely wanted to shoot down the comedy routine. If we did that idea, I was sure Mimimi would say, *The Brain would be the*

perfect straight man! And then Hinami would tell me I had to do it, so I wouldn't be able to say no.

"Is that all?" Izumi asked.

No one raised their hand. Performances were harder to envision than a booth.

"…Okay, then we'll vote!"

Everyone would get to cast one vote for either the comedy routine, the skit, the fashion show, or karaoke.

"First…" Izumi started taking a count of raised hands. The skit ended up getting eleven votes, and karaoke got ten, so we decided to have another discussion and then vote again on those two. The comedy routine only got four votes. *Don't be too sad, Mimimi.*

But really, how would we even do karaoke? The person who suggested it seemed to have raised their hand just because they were excited about the idea. Was it actually feasible? I decided to speak up, partly because of my assignment. I still hadn't gained much of my EXP from talking in front of the class, and I wanted to share my own thoughts as much as possible.

I calmed my nerves, planned out a natural-sounding sentence in my head, and spoke a little louder than normal.

"Um, with karaoke, are we imagining someone standing up on stage to sing with music in the background?"

"Yeah, I think so…," Izumi said, but I still wasn't sure what the plan was.

"So…who would be singing?"

"Oh, that's a good question!"

"Kinda, yeah."

Had she not thought about that?

Mizusawa and Mimimi giggled at my little jab. Not many other people were smiling. Man, they were cold.

"Okay, let's ask. Who wants to sing?"

"Me!" Takei was the only one who raised his hand. Well, that tracks.

"No one else?"

We had only one volunteer, and he was way too happy about it. Come on, it still wasn't in the bag!

Izumi looked up at Mizusawa anxiously. "What about you, Hiro?! You're a great singer!"

"Nope, I'll pass."

"Oh, okay."

That took some of the wind out her sails. Yeah, this was turning out just like I suspected.

I turned to Izumi again. I could feel everyone watching us, but I made an effort to keep my voice steady.

"…So karaoke would basically be a one-man show for Takei?"

"Uh, I guess?" Izumi said nervously, turning back to the class. Everyone was smiling awkwardly; they realized this wasn't going to work.

"Okay then, let's take another vote," she said.

The results were three votes for karaoke and the rest for a skit. Which was good, but why did *anyone* beside Takei choose karaoke? They were from the same jock group as he was, so maybe they thought it would be funny to make him sing. And they were right; it'd be hilarious, but let's give it up, guys.

"Great, so we're doing a skit!"

"What? No way! That sucks!"

Takei face-palmed theatrically, which made everyone laugh. His karaoke dreams may have been crushed, but ever since we'd started this festival prep, he seemed to be having the time of his life.

Mizusawa smoothly jumped in. "But what will our skit be?"

Izumi thought about it for a minute. "*R-Romeo and Juliet*?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Sticking with the classics, huh?" Mizusawa laughed lightly. Now that he said it, though, I realized the options for a skit were endless. Classic, modern, or original?

We'd chosen a skit by process of elimination, but this was actually going to be tough. Everyone seemed a little scared, but there was nothing for it now but to make it work.

"But maybe we should stick with something familiar," Mimimi said.

"Yeah, probably."

The conversation was just veering in the direction of doing a classic play, when…

…I sensed someone staring at me.

Predictably, it belonged to my Spartan master. *Okay, I get it. You want me to make a suggestion. Seriously, who sends messages by just glaring daggers at a person? Fine, fine. I'll do it.*

But what exactly was I supposed to do? Everyone was saying they wanted to do a classic. That meant I had to steer it toward something else…which left me with one option: boldly suggest the opposite approach. Well, I was getting more comfortable talking in

front of the class. *Here goes nothing.*

"Wait, if we're going to do this, don't you want to take the plunge and do an original?!"

For a second, the whole class was silent.

And then—

"That's what I'm talkin' about, Farm Boy!"

—I was rescued by Takei's loud voice. *Wow, I was not expecting that. Takei as my savior?*

"Didn't know you were that ambitious, Tomozaki!"

Mimimi sounded surprised. Okay, now everyone was looking at me. *Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.*

I stood up super straight to make myself confident and imagined my voice flying straight forward. "Yeah, guess so!"

"Well, if you want to do it that badly… Honestly, I'm good with whatever," Mizusawa said, cackling. At least he was being honest about not being invested.

Uh, or something like that.

"Yeah, why not do an original and leave the details to Tomozaki?" Nakamura jumped in, too.

"Leave the details to Tomozaki"? What the hell? I was not planning on that. Was this his way of dumping all the work on me?

"Okay, then should we do an original directed by Tomozaki?" Mimimi said teasingly.

D-director? Wait a second now—this is spinning out of control.

"What should we do? Should we see if there are any other ideas, then take a vote?" Izumi asked the class.

"But I don't think anyone has an idea they really want to do, right? So why not just go with an original?" Mizusawa said, cackling again.

He was really backing up my suggestion of doing an original, but what was he really thinking? Did he want to see me in the role of director? I could imagine him trying to get the most entertaining result out of this. I wish he'd stop with that.

Izumi nodded and turned to the class again. "If no one else has another suggestion, then we'll go with an original! Anyone?"

No one spoke up, so there was no point in voting. We were doing an original. *W-wonder how this'll turn out. As an assignment, it*

seems promising—just don't ask me about the director part.

* * *

That day after school, a big group of us were walking home together.

"I lost again?!"

"Better luck next time, Takei!"

Mimimi was teasing Takei after a round of rock-paper-scissors.

Hinami, Mimimi, Tama-chan, Nakamura, Mizusawa, Takei, and I were playing porter, that elementary school game where the loser of a rock-paper-scissors match had to carry everyone else's bags to the next telephone pole or corner or whatever. Very nostalgic.

And the cold, harsh truth was that Takei had just lost four times in a row.

"Why me again?!" he howled, pressing a hand to his head dramatically.

Well, the answer was simple. Takei always carried our bags because he always went with rock when it mattered most. He played normally when we were in a big group, but when it came down to a runoff between two or three people, he could only produce rocks for whatever reason.

At first, other people lost some rounds and had to carry the bags, but the more we played, the more people started to notice his fatal flaw, and now he was at four straight losses. With only himself to blame.

"To that corner, please," Nakamura said, a little meanly.

"Dang it!" Takei sounded humiliated, but I could still tell he was having fun. That was just how he was. "Oof!!!"

He heaved all our bags onto his shoulders and sped ahead of the rest of us. Amazing horsepower.

"C'mon, man, hurry up!" the unburdened Nakamura said, running alongside Takei.

Mimimi watched with glittering eyes. "Ooh, are we racing?!"

"Yep, see ya!"

A second before Mimimi took off running, Mizusawa sprinted ahead with a cool smile.

"Hey, false start!"

"Byeeee!"

“Et tu, Aoi?!”

Mimimi started to run a few paces behind Hinami and Mizusawa. Everyone looked super happy racing down the long, straight stretch.

“They sure have a lot of energy!”

Tama-chan was standing next to me, smiling. Huh. Was this my chance? The only photo in my quest that I could take on this walk home was the shot of Tama-chan making a funny face, so the fact that we were alone together was a big plus.

“Yeah. You’re not gonna join the race?”

She looked at the others with a placid expression. There was no tension in her face at all; she was completely relaxed and open. Until recently, I’d never seen her like this—before, she was always somehow on guard.

“Nope.” She spoke slowly, as if she was thinking aloud. “Recently, I’ve felt more like I can just hang out without doing stuff I’m not comfortable with.”

“…Huh.”

She gave me a confident look. “Thank you again!”

“Nah, you’re the one who made it happen.”

I meant it, too, but she sounded a little sullen when she responded:

“Come on! I doubt I could have done any of that without everything you taught me.”

“I guess so…,” I said hesitantly.

She pointed at me sharply, like she always did. “Just take the compliment already!”

She was so completely herself, so completely honest that it really blew me away.

I nodded slowly. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Much better!”

She grinned, and it felt like sunshine.

Anyway, the assignment. How could I get her to make a funny face? I was trying to think of something when I had a realization.

Tama-chan and I had a particular way of communicating.

I looked her straight in the eye.

“Hey.”

“What?”

I took out my phone. “So I got an Instagram, and I wanted to post a picture of you making a funny face. Mind making one for

me?”

“What?!”

Yup. This approach always works well with Tama-chan. If my assignment is to take a picture of her making a funny face, then I’d just ask her directly. Surefire.

“I thought it would be something different to post.”

“Well, that’s sudden.”

“I know.”

I looked steadily at her. It was so easy to talk like this without any pretenses. She thought for a minute before answering.

“Okay…that’s fine.”

She seemed confused that I’d asked so directly, but maybe she couldn’t think of a reason to say no. She showed up on Hinami’s Instagram sometimes, so she didn’t seem opposed to having her picture online.

Hinami probably wanted me to use my conversational skills to get her to make a funny face, but our relationship wasn’t like that. *Not bad, huh? Bet you never guessed I’d ask her straight-out, eh, Hinami?*

“Okay, great. I’ll just take a couple.”

We stopped walking and began a strange little photo shoot.

“How’s this?” Using her inborn potential to the full, she made an adorable, hilarious face.

“Ha-ha-ha, that’s awesome.”

I took the shot. She looked like her sunny smile had just exploded into a supernova. Very impressive facial muscles.

“Can I post this one?”

“Yeah, sure.” She agreed immediately. Huh. Asking directly is so easy.

“You do one, too, Tomozaki!”

She held up her phone. *Huh? Me? I’ve never made a funny face in my life.*

But I couldn’t exactly say no after asking her to do the same thing, so I had to try…

“O-okay.”

I made my own version of a funny face, and she snapped a photo.

“…Hmm.” She looked at her phone and made a noncommittal sound.

“Wh-what?”

“It’s not very funny.”

She showed me the photo, and I was definitely holding back. Compared with her, I clearly had no idea what I was doing.

“Y-yeah, this is kinda eh.”

“All right. If you screw up your face like this…”

“Oh, okay…”

Suddenly, she was giving me a lecture on funny faces. Not only was my student outdoing me, she was taking on my role. *Looking forward to future lessons, Tama-sensei.*

* * *

That night, I was sitting at my desk, as I had been for the past few hours.

“This is…”

In my hands was the one-centimeter-thick manuscript Kikuchi-san had given me. I’d started reading around an hour earlier, and I only had a few pages left.

“…Wow.”

I was completely spellbound by her book.

To tell the truth, I don’t read many things like this, and I don’t know about the finer points of story writing.

I love video games, but I don’t watch a lot of narrative stuff like anime or movies, so I can’t really compare her book to much else.

But I can say one thing.

The stories Kikuchi-san created were gentle and warm.

The manuscript she gave me was made up of five short stories with loosely connected themes.

The story of a human who hurt a mermaid in order to take her tears, which were made of jewels.

The story of a boy and a half human, half beast who built a relationship as they talked from either side of a large rock blocking the mouth of a cave.

The story of a werewolf who yearned to be human after his heart was stolen by the beauty of the moon reflected in a lake.

The story of a robot maid to an aristocratic family who fell in love with a tin toy.

All were set in fantasy worlds, and while they had elements of harsh realism, they all ended on a gentle note.

They reflected Kikuchi-san's clear-eyed worldview and how she saw everything without passing judgment, and that made reading them very enjoyable. She was like an angel.

I was on the last story.

"On the Wings of the Unknown."

It was the tale of a girl who cared for a flying dragon in a castle garden isolated from the world.

This was the gist of the story.

There once was a world where humans and dragons lived together in harmony.

The land dragons, who ran on the ground, were raised by people to serve as their porters and means of transportation. Because these dragons reproduced easily and ate anything, they were used in many fields of work.

They grew to be the size of houses, and they shed their skins many times along the way. That skin was used to make clothes and other items. Its strength made it valuable in many applications, so it was ubiquitous in the humans' lives. The dragons were powerful, too, and if trained well, they had the ability to perform repetitive tasks. They were used on construction sites and other situations where great strength was needed.

Dragons were a deeply ingrained part of everyday life.

But the flying dragons, on the other hand, were special.

Unlike the other dragons, they did not reproduce easily. They only drank pure water and ate the fruit of trees fed by this water, and they were fickle and hard to tame. They weren't as resilient under stress, which made them difficult to raise.

Yet the pure-white creatures were incredibly beautiful. When they flew, their translucent wings caught the sunlight and shone with a rainbow of colors. But most importantly, this world had no airplanes or hot-air balloons, so the royalty and aristocracy treasured them for their ability to make the human dream of flight a reality.

The flying dragons were so delicate that the slightest error in raising them could lead to their death. Not only that, but a dragon that survived to adulthood would often be unable to use its wings to fly.

When raising these creatures, one element was said to be more important than anything else.

They must never be exposed to the impurities of the world.

The story had three main characters:

Libra, a curious commoner who was the son of a locksmith and came to the castle regularly with his father.

Alucia, a strong-willed, quick-witted member of the royal family who was directly in line to be queen.

And Kris, an orphan girl who grew up isolated in the garden where she cared for flying dragons. She had been allowed no human contact with anyone other than the royal family since she was very young.

The tale began with a castle guard discovering a baby who had been abandoned outside the castle. This was not so unusual, perhaps because when parents were unable to care for a child, they often thought the child would have a better life if he or she were taken in by the castle. The guard told the chancellor that he planned to "deal with" the baby as he usually did.

But it so happened that at that particular time, the chancellor was searching for someone unsullied by the world's impurities, someone who could be locked away and wouldn't be missed. Perhaps the orphaned baby could be the dragon keeper.

The slaves already knew the impurities of the world. But if the job was given to a member of the royal family, they would have to be cut off from the world in order to stay pure.

It was common for royalty to leave the castle after reaching a certain age, and the chancellor was not sure how much worldly impurity was tolerable. Those with royal blood were said to be pure, but how much could they interact with the world without losing that purity? The line was not easy to draw.

Ideally, a royal child would be isolated from birth, but of course, no parents would allow such a thing.

And it was as the chancellor was considering this dilemma that the newborn, completely unsullied baby was left outside the castle, with no parents or family to utter a word of complaint. This was the perfect candidate for a dragon keeper.

Fifteen years had passed since that day.

Libra, the would-be locksmith who lived in the castle town, was headed to the castle with his father.

The royal family was a regular client of his father's, and Libra—who was going to take over the family business in the future—accompanied his father each time he went there in order to learn the ins and outs of the job.

In the course of his trips to the castle to learn the locksmith's craft, Libra began talking with Alucia, a young girl just his age who was in line for the throne. They became best friends.

Now Libra and Alucia were fifteen. Like many young people of their age, they were overflowing with curiosity and energy.

The castle had a number of areas where entrance was strictly forbidden—perhaps it was only natural that they were desperately inquisitive.

But the things they hoped to find—such as old torture devices left over from a bygone era, or a book of magic with the power to destroy the world, sealed away in some old room—were completely lacking. The forbidden areas were merely musty and dilapidated, kept hidden to prevent visitors from seeing any shamefully imperfect sights. Of course, the two teenagers did not know that.

One day, they slipped away from Libra's father and the chancellor, who was overseeing his work, and using Libra's lockpicking skills, they snuck through a locked door into that old section of the castle.

They found the forbidden places to be much more ordinary than they had expected, but still, their hearts were thrilled by the sense of adventure, and they explored the whole castle.

Finally, their adventure was nearing its end.

They opened the large door leading to a garden that they had been instructed to never, ever enter.

There, they encountered a pure-white dragon with enormous wings, and a single orphan girl, whose skin was as pale as her ward's and who knew nothing of the world.

"…Wow."

Like the other stories, I sensed Kikuchi-san's touch in many places as I lost myself in the tale.

The characters seemed to be having so much fun that just reading about them was enjoyable. I wasn't sure what was different about this story. But compared with the other four, the emotions of the characters seemed to flow effortlessly into my mind.

I turned page after page—and then the story took a more serious turn.

When it became known that Libra and Alucia had met Kris, both intruders were caught, but Libra, the outsider, was imprisoned in the castle dungeon.

As the keeper of the flying dragon, Kris had to avoid becoming tainted by the world's impurities. But her encounter with the common Libra was deemed a contamination. What should their punishment be? How should the impurity be removed? They awaited judgment.

Finally, the king—Alucia's father—concluded that Libra must be sacrificed on the altar of the gods.

Those, of course, were only the fancy political words devised to make the decision look better to the public; in reality, he was to be executed.

The rearing of flying dragons was a project of the utmost importance to the kingdom. A great deal of money had been spent preparing the garden and purchasing baby dragons. Even the slightest risks had to be avoided so that the investment did not go to waste, and if any action held the tiniest possibility of cleansing the impurity, then it must be implemented.

Thus, the execution. That was the decision of the king.

But the moment he announced it, Alucia spoke up.

"Father. Do you not remember?" she asked slowly.

"…Remember what?" Her father's eyebrows shot up.

"You have quite a few love children hidden away."

"Alucia…what are you saying?"

"Pardon me. I shall keep your secret from the public. In exchange…there is something I would like you to hear. I have learned Libra is actually one of those love children, which means he is of the line of kings. And that means he cannot contaminate the flying dragons."

Alucia's bluff turned her childhood best friend into a temporary brother.

As Alucia's sibling, Libra was not viewed as impure, and he was spared execution.

I was surprised that Kikuchi-san had come up with a character who would blackmail her father with information he did not want revealed and lie to him about her friend's identity. She really did think about the darker side of the world.

Libra was taken in by the royal family and charged with caring for Kris. Basically, in exchange for being allowed to live and adopted by the royal family, he was made to perform an essentially unnecessary odd job.

Libra and Alucia made friends with Kris, who had never had anyone care for her in her life, and after that, there were a few big events followed by periods of calm as the story progressed toward its end. When I thought about the fact that Kikuchi-san was the one writing about the romance between the three, those scenes felt more vivid and fresh, brief as they were.

I was reading the manuscript as a story, but it also felt a little like spying on Kikuchi-san's heart. Finally, I turned the last page.

"…What?"

The story was unfinished.

"This…can't be the end."

The page was blank, but clearly, the story wasn't over. This wasn't merely an unresolved ending—several storylines were cut off midway through.

Was it a mistake?

I considered asking Kikuchi-san about it over LINE, but it was

already after midnight, so I decided not to. She definitely seemed like the early-to-bed, early-to-rise type.

"…Huh."

I put the manuscript in my bag, feeling vaguely unsatisfied, then brushed my teeth, crawled into bed, and closed my eyes.

How would the story of Kris, Libra, and Alucia end?

What kind of climax did Kikuchi-san have in mind?

As I lay there awake, I couldn't stop the questions from spinning around in my mind.

* * *

At the next morning's meeting, I showed Hinami the picture of Tama-chan and got a predictably sarcastic response. "Finally, a photo that's not blurry."

Before I knew it, lunchtime had arrived.

"…Kikuchi-san."

"Oh…yes?"

It was unusual for me to talk to Kikuchi-san at this time of day. She sat behind me and over one row, so when fourth period ended, I took about ten breaths to calm myself down, then turned around and started a conversation to her right away. I know taking ten breaths first isn't technically "right away," but I did my best.

"Hey, um, can you talk right now?"

"Um, o-okay." She seemed a little flustered. It was the first time I'd talked to her at lunch, after all.

But I wanted to have a real conversation, not just exchange a few words between classes. All the stories she'd given me were great, and I wanted to let her know.

"So, er…," I said, whispering so no one else could hear me. "I read the book."

"You did?" she said, her eyes darting around. Finally, she looked at me. "All of it…?"

"Um, yeah, all of it."

Did I read it too fast? Maybe she was thinking, *I just gave it to him yesterday, and he already read it? Is he desperate or something?* Hinami might say I came off as overeager.

"Th-thank you…"

But she just blushed and thanked me. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Good thing Kikuchi-san is an actual angel.

"I wanted to tell you what I thought…"

"Oh, yes…I'd like to hear it, too."

We both looked away from each other. What was this?

Kikuchi-san glanced around like a squirrel poking its head out of its nest, held her breath for a second, then opened her mouth a little.

"Then d-do you want to…eat lunch together?" she asked haltingly. Her voice was shaky, and she had to pause for breath, but it was still clear and beautiful as a bell. The light in her eyes as they gently pierced me were as enchanting as a pool of water sprinkled with flower petals in early afternoon.

"Uh, okay. Let's go eat."

I was starting to hyperventilate a little, too, as I nodded. Finally, I managed to take a deep breath and calm myself down. Kikuchi-san was blushing. What was going on? I definitely hadn't expected her to invite me to have lunch together, so she'd already caught me off guard. Awfully sly for an angel.

"Um, I'll get ready, then."

"O-okay."

I took my wallet out of my bag and turned to Kikuchi-san again. She was ready, too, so the two of us walked to the dining hall together. I had no idea what was going on, but I felt really restless. Maybe because people were watching us.

Right. I was so caught up in trying to talk to her that I completely forgot about what this might look like to everyone else. No doubt Mizusawa would tease me about it later. *Man, I hope he doesn't find out.*

* * *

"And when Andy held out the ferns right then, it was, like, wow…"

We were sitting in the back of the cafeteria, where we were less likely to be seen—Kikuchi-san and me, eating lunch together. I'd bought some udon from the cafeteria, and she had brought hers from home.

Obviously, we were talking about the stories she'd let me read.

"O-oh."

"And the story about Wolfin…"

I was using the Tomozaki Method to the max—which was to say, I was telling her exactly what I thought. I'd always been good at that, and combined with the weapons I'd picked up more recently, like vocal tone and expression, I was even better at it now. Maybe I should call this the Tomozaki Method 2.0. No, maybe I wasn't there yet.

"I never guessed his dad was going to show up at the end!"

"Oh, that! I actually thought of that after I finished writing and changed the ending."

"Really?"

"I thought it would be a weight off his mind…"

"Oh yeah! I definitely agree."

Kikuchi-san nodded shyly as she listened to me.

This was a bit different from our gentle time in the library; it was livelier.

"And you'd think Lugor would be the one to break the rock, since he's the beast-person, so when Mita did it as a human, it was like, whoa."

"Oh, I know!"

"It was like he was breaking through the barrier between their species by using intelligence instead of brute strength…"

"Wow…I'm so happy you got that…"

I was telling Kikuchi-san my reactions to her stories, which reflected her thoughts. And through her answers, I was learning if I had guessed those thoughts correctly.

I wasn't talking about myself, but somehow, this was as exciting as sharing secrets.

It was like we were able to understand each other just by doing this.

"And then…!"

I was having so much fun that I started peppering her with comments. She giggled, and the expression on her face looked somehow grown-up.

"…Huh?"

She slowly placed her hands on her chest and smiled a truly happy smile.

"I'm so glad you read it."

Her smile was so perfect, it could have been created just to melt my heart. I let it wrap around me like a pair of huge wings from her back, dissolving me body and soul into motes of glittering light that floated off to the Land of Euphoria.

"Um, me too… Thanks for letting me read it."

The Land of Euphoria was made entirely of pleasant warmth and gentle smiles, but for some reason, my whole body was burning up. I hastily gulped down some water to fix that, then took a long, slow breath and exhaled.

Then I remembered my question from the night before.

"Oh yeah. I wanted to ask you something…"

"What?" Kikuchi-san tilted her head at the precise angle the gods had deemed most adorable.

"The last story didn't seem to have an ending. Why was that?"

"Really?!" she said. "Do you mean the story about the flying dragon?"

"Yeah."

She rested one finger on her lips. "I—I made a mistake."

"You did?"

She nodded. "It's not finished yet. It was in the same file as the others… I must have printed it along with them accidentally."

"Oh, that's what happened."

So she wrote multiple stories in the same Word file, or whatever software she was using. When she printed them, all the stories came out at once, including the one that was incomplete.

"Yes…I should have left that one out."

"I guess…but…" I rested my chin on my hand. "I thought that one was really interesting."

Kikuchi-san nodded, apparently ashamed. "Th-thank you… I'm sorry for giving you something unfinished to read." She looked depressed.

I shook my head. "No, even if it wasn't finished, I really liked it. I'm glad I got to read it."

"R-really?" She turned to me, brightening up a bit.

"I'm looking forward to reading the rest."

"Thank you."

I smiled at her as kindly as possible, channeling Mizusawa's cool expression.

Kikuchi-san blinked a few times, then looked away modestly. *Huh? Did I do something wrong?*

Finally, she slowly turned her gaze to me again, and this time, her eyes were oddly serious. “Um, I was wondering… Which part of the book stayed with you the most?”

“…Um…” I paused for just a moment, landing on an answer faster than I expected.

There was no question—that last story had resonated more than all the others.

“I’m not sure if this is the answer you want to hear, but…”

“…Yes?”

I returned Kikuchi-san’s solemn gaze. “It was the unfinished story—the one about the flying dragon.”

Kikuchi-san widened her eyes in surprise. Her right eye was the moon, and her left was the sun.

“When I was reading it, it was like the characters were alive in my mind, or something…”

I was supposed to be good at speaking what I thought, but parsing that abstract feeling into precise words was hard. I didn’t know how to get that across other than saying, well…“I don’t know how to explain it, but it was really good.”

What was the name for that feeling?

As I read that story, a world formed in my mind with strange effortlessness. The subtlest moods, the smell of the earth, and the breath of the characters reached me through the page.

Simply by reading it, I was experiencing all the colors of the story’s world—

“…Oh.” Suddenly, as I wandered through my thoughts, I hit on it.

Kikuchi-san was waiting for me to go on, her expression still serious.

“You told me something once before,” I said.

“I did?”

I nodded. “You said when you read Andi’s books, you see the world he’s created in your mind’s eye, and that’s what you like about his work.”

“…Yes, that’s true.” She smiled happily.

“When I read that last story of yours…”

“…Yes?”

And then I told her my realization exactly as it occurred to me.

“…I saw everything in full color.”

"…Really?"

She parted her lips slightly in surprise.

I took stock of the difference between my feelings and my words, speaking bit by bit to gradually filter out anything that didn't line up.

"Yeah. That's really what it was like. While I was reading, a film was just…playing in my mind. The characters felt so real, and it was like I wanted to help them somehow… Yeah! It was like I wanted to go there myself!"

I was getting more excited as I found the right words to communicate.

"Ever since we started talking, I've been reading Andi's books, right? I was never really into reading, but I started to like his stuff."

"…Uh-huh." She nodded slowly.

"His books are about fantasy worlds, but they're so gentle. The characters feel so familiar—kinda cynical, but you can't help caring about them anyway…!"

I looked at the manuscript laying on the table.

"And that's how I felt about your last story!"

I ended on a very forceful note.

"Basically…I really liked it."

Yeah, I know I got too worked up. I was talking pretty loud there at the end. It's that nerdy side of me; I always talk too much about stuff I like.

I looked back up at Kikuchi-san, slightly ashamed of myself.

—Huh?!

Her eyes were filled with tears!

"Wh-what's wrong?!"

I was freaking out. *What the heck what the heck what the heck? How did I just end up making a girl cry when we're alone together? This is like one of those mega-super-hard optional dungeons! I don't have the levels for this!* I mean, why was she crying? Was my nerdiness so overpowering that it brought her to tears? She was right there in front of me feeling sad, and if there was some way, any way, to take away her pain, I wanted to do it, but how? *What am I even talking about?*

Then, inexplicably, Kikuchi-san apologized. “Um…I’m sorry.”

“…You’re sorry? About what?”

She sniffled and rubbed her eyes. Apparently, there weren’t enough tears pooled up to overflow. M-maybe that was a good sign?

“Uh, um…”

“Uh-huh?”

She had calmed down now, and as she was searching for words, she didn’t look the least bit sad.

“I’ve loved Andi’s books for forever, and I’ve always wanted to write something like that myself… I really do mean ‘always.’”

“…Uh-huh…”

It was like she was reflecting on her whole life so far.

“I love the atmosphere of his worlds, and his characters… I think that’s what I wanted to create…” She smiled, her eyes moist and filled with emotion. “I know it’s still not done, but for you to read it and say it’s similar to his books… I’m so happy,” she said, as if she was savoring the words, and placed her hands gently on the manuscript.

“…Oh.”

I took it all in for a moment, then silently looked at her hands, which were resting on the sheaf of papers.

At her long, slender fingers and her neatly trimmed, pale-pink nails.

At her skin, as fine and white as fresh snow.

She had created that story with those fingers.

“Kikuchi-san, I was thinking…”

My mouth was moving of its own will…

“Maybe you could use that last story…”

…because this was what I really, truly wanted.

“…to write the class play?”

4

Sometimes the main character can't enter the village of another species on his own

"The class play…?" she repeated.

"Yeah," I said firmly. "For the school festival."

I wasn't sure why, but I wanted so badly to see the class act out her story.

"B-but…," she said hesitantly, lowering her eyes.

I could hear her pessimism, but the underlying message was not so much a *no* as an *I'm scared*.

I stayed as honest and up-front as I could. "I'd love to see it."

"R-really…?" She looked away, stuttering a little.

"I don't want to pressure you…but is it totally out of the question?"

Of course, it would only work if she wanted to do it. I wasn't about to force her to write something just because I wanted to see it.

"It's not impossible, but…"

"But what?"

I was leaning forward eagerly, but she was still thinking. Her voice was like the wind caressing a flower to share its secrets. "That last story…was actually the first of the five that I started."

"…Oh, really?"

She nodded. "At first, it went very smoothly, and I liked all the characters very much. I shouldn't say this as an author…but I loved that story more than the others."

"…Yeah."

Just listening to her gentle voice was such a pleasant feeling, as if her words were slipping directly into my mind.

I listened quietly—no need to interject.

"But that was the problem… I couldn't decide how I wanted to

end a story I loved so much. I didn't know what I wanted to happen to characters who were so close to my heart."

She stroked her manuscript like she was caressing a baby.

"So I couldn't finish it."

"…Oh."

Her words made perfect sense.

I didn't know anything about the craft of writing. But just by reading it, I could tell she had put her heart into that story. There must be some very strong feelings behind it.

"It's really important to me, so I'm afraid of ruining it…"

"Okay, I understand."

The more you loved something, the more scared you were to lose it. Maybe making it the class play was insensitive of me.

"Maybe it's better if you give yourself the time to finish it when you're ready."

I felt satisfied with that conclusion.

Kikuchi-san nodded. "Yes, that might be best," she said. Then she went on.

"But then again, it might not be."

She smiled teasingly.

I stared at her blankly.

"I used to be scared of so many things outside my own world." Her eyes glittered like jade, looking brightly toward the future. "When I watched you jump out from your own lonely world into an unknown universe…it made me think."

I didn't know where she was looking or what she saw ahead of her. But—

"I want to see that world, too."

—I knew whatever it was, it was real.

She gave me one of those slightly shy smiles typical of a teenage girl.

"So I'd like to try writing the play."

That smile was filled with the immense strength of a timid girl taking one step into the unknown.

* * *

After school that day, we had a class meeting about the school festival. The whole committee was standing in front of the class.

The topic of conversation was the play. We'd decided to do an original without having a script or even an idea in mind, and we had to choose something soon, so everyone was getting more and more anxious.

I had one goal: get the class to choose Kikuchi-san's story for the play.

"What kind of story should we do?" Izumi asked the class.

There was a long silence. After all, we had decided to do an original basically on the spur of the moment.

I watched the class, waiting for an appropriate amount of silence to pass, then seized my opportunity. "Um…can I say something?"

Everyone looked at me. Being the center of attention did make me nervous, but I was getting used to it. Today was already better than the previous day. I guess my magic resistance must have increased. Incidentally, Kikuchi-san's eyes were wide-open, and her hand was over her mouth.

"You've got an idea?" Mizusawa asked.

I nodded. "Um, I have a possible script…"

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed Hinami raising her eyebrows in surprise. No matter how proactive she wanted me to be, she probably didn't expect me to bring in a script. *Too bad, Hinami. This isn't an assignment—it's just something I want to do.*

"Nice going, Brain! That's what I was waiting for!" Mimimi said encouragingly. I made an enthusiastic noise to buy time.

"So what is it?" Mizusawa said, apparently eagerly anticipating my answer. In one sense, their total belief in me made my job easier, but in another sense, disappointing them was way scarier.

"Well, take a look…," I said, holding out the last story from Kikuchi-san's manuscript to Mizusawa. Everyone was watching the two of us. Oof.

"Oh, you've already got something?" he said, flipping through the beginning. "…Huh." He scanned the first two pages or so, nodding a couple of times. "It's really well written, but who's it by? You?"

"No, it wasn't me."

“Oh, then who?”

“Uh…”

Mizusawa handed the manuscript back to me. “I think it looks good. I don’t know the whole story, but I can tell it’s well-done.”

“Hey, I wanna see!” Mimimi grabbed the manuscript. She stared at it intently for ten seconds or so. “…This is better than I was expecting!”

Could she really tell from spending only ten seconds looking at the first page? Was she just overwhelmed by all the words, or was she actually an avid reader who could get a sense of a story from the first couple of lines? Mimimi was a surprisingly serious student, so the latter was more likely than you’d think.

Some kids in our class were starting to wonder out loud what it was like, so I handed copies of the manuscript to the person at the head of each row—Kikuchi-san and I had printed them out earlier using the printer next to the dining hall. It would have been better to make a summary or something, but we didn’t have time for that.

“You sure are well prepared!” Izumi said, sounding surprised. *What are you thinking, Izumi? If a low-level character isn’t prepared, he’ll get creamed in battle.*

“We don’t have much time, so how about everyone just reads through the beginning?” I said to the class. For a second, I was almost leading the meeting. Impressive involvement in the school festival, eh?

I waited a couple of minutes, watching the reactions.

People started chatting among themselves.

“Interesting…”

“I like it!”

“This is the real deal!”

“Yeah…”

“It’s like a novel!”

Hmm. The overall response was positive, but they didn’t seem to be 100 percent excited about it. But that’s about what you can expect for this sort of thing, I think.

To start with, a lot of people were probably turned off by the fact that it was a formally written story, so expecting unanimous approval was unrealistic. I mean, the members of Erika Konno’s group were basically wandering around the back of the class without reading at all, so getting every student on board would literally be impossible. I figured it was enough for people to

understand it was a solid piece of writing.

"I was thinking we could use this as a base for talking about how to adapt it and deciding on the roles and stuff," I said. After all, the story wasn't even finished, so that process was inevitable.

Okay. The groundwork was mostly done. Considering no one else had a suggestion and I'd come this well prepared, the likelihood of my proposal being rejected was pretty low. It wasn't like the class had decided to do a play because they had their heart set on anything already.

"But who wrote this?" asked a member of the organizing committee—uh, Seno-san, I think? She was one of Mimimi's friends who usually took notes when we had meetings and hung out a lot with Kashiwazaki-san, my Instagram follower.

"Uh, um…" I glanced at Kikuchi-san, and she nodded. *Okay, I'm good to go.* "It's by Kikuchi-san, in our class," I said loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Mizusawa and Mimimi snapped their heads in my direction.

"Oh, okay. I see now," he said with a laugh.

I wondered what exactly he was seeing, but it wasn't really something I could joke around about, so I just nodded and said, "Yeah."

All Mimimi said was, "Oh. Really?" Her voice was strangely flat.

I turned to the rest of the committee members. "If there aren't any other suggestions, I think it would be great to use Kikuchi-san's story as the basis for an original play… What do you think?"

Several committee members agreed, saying things like, "Yeah, it could work" and "Why not?" Again, not totally decisive, but everyone seemed to recognize we didn't have any other options, and the story was solid. Also, since Kikuchi-san was always so quiet and serious, her image probably didn't hurt.

"So…does anyone else have an idea?" Izumi asked the class again. Predictably, no one raised their hand.

"Okay, so let's go with this then," Mizusawa said with his usual coolness. "Kikuchi-san, think you can bring a simple outline of the story next time?"

Kikuchi-san gave a start, then nodded awkwardly. "O-okay."

Mizusawa smiled. "All right. And after that, we can decide on roles."

"Sounds good!" Izumi replied.

“And we should probably post the manuscript somewhere that everyone can access.”

“Good idea!”

Mizusawa had taken over the leadership role, and Izumi was happily backing him up. Especially there at the end. *Izumi, are you gonna let him take your job?*

“Kikuchi-san, think you can post the file online?”

“Y-yes!” She nodded earnestly, even though she looked like she was in shock.

“Okay. How about I set up a LINE group for the school festival that everyone can join?”

“Y-yes, that’s fine.”

Everything was falling into place so neatly. Mizusawa had mentioned the LINE group super casually, but I wondered if everyone in class knew how to use it. I guess between Mizusawa’s friends and Hinami’s, most people in class would be covered. In fact, up till a couple months ago, I might have been the only one who didn’t have it.

“So I’m starring, right?!” Takei said.

“No way,” Nakamura shot back.

“What?!”

The class laughed at the usual routine.

Anyway, this was looking up. The pieces had fallen into place for now.

Once the manuscript became our class play, a lot more people would see it.

I glanced at Kikuchi-san, and she bowed very briefly toward me with a reassured smile on her face. She was so conscientious.

I felt someone looking at me from the side, so I turned to see who it was. Mimimi was standing there, but her attention was elsewhere. *Huh. I must have imagined it.*

* * *

After that, the discussion turned to the manga café, and the class started talking excitedly about how to decorate the booth, what to serve, and who would bring what series. The committee wrote down what we’d need to get, and the meeting was over. Huh. I was kinda surprised; the café was probably gonna be a lot of fun, too. I

might even be able to enjoy this school festival like a normal person.

Once the discussion was over, we started making stuff like the decorations, signs, and menus. I hung out with Nakamura's group and worked on firing comebacks whenever he tried to tease me, which happened a lot. It was pretty fun, but I should be using the free time to work on Hinami's assignments.

Since everyone was working on festival prep for the rest of the day, most students were busy with some project or other.

So if I was smart about it, I should be able to work on my quest.

I pulled up the chat messages from Hinami to see what was left on my photo list.

- A shot of Takahiro Mizusawa wearing glasses
- A shot of Yuzu Izumi eating ice cream
- A shot of at least two girls you've never talked to before
- A shot of you with Fuka Kikuchi

Narrowing that down further, I realized the Izumi shot would be tough because of the ice cream. It wasn't impossible, since the cafeteria sold ice cream, but if I asked her to eat it now, she'd probably be like, *What, again?* so that quest was weirdly risky. Also, pulling her out of Konno's group would be hard.

As for the Mizusawa quest, I was reaching the point where I could just ask him to do some things, but I didn't know how to get him to put glasses on. No one I talked to a lot usually wore glasses. Kikuchi-san only seemed to wear hers at work. Should I take him to a store that sold them and convince him to try a pair or two? The next day was Saturday. I'd probably have to come up with a strategy and meet with him over the weekend.

That left two options. I decided to try getting the photo I was less likely to be able to get under ordinary circumstances. Since I'd have plenty of chances to take a photo with Kikuchi-san in the library or when we were discussing the script, that meant the shot of at least two girls I'd never talked to before was at the top of the list. Plus, the mood right now made it easy to start a conversation with anyone.

As I worked on coloring menus and writing funny graffiti on

them with Nakamura's gang, I looked over at Hinami's group. A picture of Kashiwazaki-san and Seno-san was probably the only thing I could manage right now. Since I hadn't ever talked to either of them when Hinami gave me the assignment, they'd count as "girls I'd never talked to." The two of them were drawing some stuff on a big piece of vellum paper with Hinami, Mimimi, and Tama-chan.

I kept glancing over at them, waiting for the right moment, and my eyes kept meeting Mimimi's. *What?* She kept smiling at me, too. *What? What does that mean?*

Eventually, Mimimi bounced excitedly over to us, like she wanted to know what was up. *I wasn't looking at you, Mimimi!* Tama-chan came with her and was looking absently at Hinami, Kashiwazaki-san, and Seno-san. Hmm.

"Why do you keep looking at us?!" Mimimi asked me.

"I think you're imagining it!" Tama-chan shot back sharply.

"Yeah, you definitely are," I piled on.

Mimimi gaped at me suspiciously. "No way, our eyes met a million times!"

"I don't remember that!"

As we bantered back and forth and I tried to figure out how to steer this toward my assignment, Mimimi suddenly caught me off guard.

"Hey! When did you and Kikuchi-san have your private meeting?! You really pulled this together fast!"

"Oh…uh, well…" I dodged, while Mimimi pouted.

"Guess you're just really taking to the director role?"

"No…"

She was being weirdly nosy. I didn't know what to say, so I changed the subject and tried to steer the conversation in a direction that would help achieve my quest.

"By the way…what are you guys doing over there?"

I glanced at Hinami and the other two girls.

"We're trying to figure out a design for the hallway side of the booth!" Tama-chan said.

"Ah, I see."

Mimimi nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, wanna see?" she said, looking toward their group.

Takei jumped in. "I do!!"

"Guess I'll go, too, then," I said, acting like I was just going

along with him.

"Okay, come on!"

With that, Takei and I merged with Hinami's group. If I was going to have a buddy in this guerrilla operation, Nakamura or Mizusawa would have been more reassuring, but what could I do? I'd have to rely on myself this time.

Takei, Mimimi, Tama-chan, and I headed into the Land of Girls.

"Ta-daa! Here it is!" Mimimi flapped her hands as she revealed the design.

"…Ooh," I said in awe.

The big sheet was covered with childish pop-art images of foods, drinks, and comic books.

Someone was obviously good at drawing, and their work was scattered around at critical spots. Because of that, the overall design avoided looking too disorganized and instead clearly expressed the concept of a "kid's drawing."

It was a smart way of making the whole thing look good even if some members of the group couldn't draw very well… My guess was Hinami was behind that idea. When I looked over at her, she was grinning from ear to ear and drawing a childish picture of a fried egg. Huh, never saw her looking that kid-like before…

"Wow, that looks awesome!" Takei said, obviously impressed.

"Right?! Would you like to draw something, Takei-san?" Seno-san asked excitedly.

"No way, really?!" He picked up one of the crayons that was lying around and started to mull over what to draw. Restraint was not in his vocabulary.

Hmm. Why not say that?

"I think he was just waiting for you to ask," I joked.

And then…

…not only Mimimi, Hinami, and Tama-chan, but Kashiwazaki-san and Seno-san giggled.

S-so…

"Ah-ha-ha. Right? He's already holding a crayon!" Kashiwazaki-san agreed, turning to me. Seno-san, who was standing next to her, was smiling at me, too. Wait a second, what was going on? Unless I was imagining things, they seemed eager to bring me into their circle.

That was a surprise, but I reminded myself to keep my voice even and come up with a witty reply. What would get everyone

laughing even more?

"Exactly!"

I couldn't think of anything, so I just relied on the cheerful tone. Typical bottom-tier character behavior.

"Hey, I saw your Insta! That picture of Tama-chan cracked me up!" Seno-san said to me. *H-huh, what's happening now?* I didn't understand how, but I'd somehow started a conversation with two girls at once.

This situation was clearly beyond my skill level, so I went back to the most basic of basics and drummed up my confidence with my posture.

But I still couldn't think of anything to say, so I decided to mention what I was thinking when I took the picture of Tama-chan. It sounded like something I came up with on the spot, but it wasn't.

"Yeah, that's an amazing photo, right? She's like a supernova."

Seno-san laughed again. "So dramatic!"

R-really? That went well. Good thing I'm always talking to myself. My brain was about to explode, but I propped up my confidence with physicality instead.

"Ooh, show me! I wanna see!" Mimimi interrupted curiously.

"Um, here…"

I pulled up the picture, and she apparently found it hilarious.

"Ah-ha-ha! You're so damn cute, Tama!"

"You said it, not me," Tama-chan replied, a proud expression on her face. She wouldn't have done that a few weeks earlier. She was still herself—just easier to get close to.

Hinami leaned over, too, and smiled as if she'd never seen it before.

"Ah-ha-ha, agreed! She's so cute, I think we should draw her face right here!" she said, pointing to the vellum paper.

"Let's not take this too far!" Tama-chan said, and everyone laughed.

As I listened to their conversation, I thought about how to achieve my photo quest.

Everyone in this group knew I'd started an Instagram. Actually, based on how Kashiwazaki-san and Seno-san were acting toward me, I think they saw me as "the guy who just started an Instagram."

Which meant this would probably work…

I waited for a pause in the conversation to make my proposal.

"…How about we all take a silly picture?"

Mimimi took the bait. “Ooh, good idea. You guys are toast!”

“It’s not a competition, Mimimi!”

Everyone smiled at Hinami’s quick comeback. I’d thought of saying the exact same thing, but my reflexes were way slower than hers. Sometimes, the mentor swoops down and crushes the disciple.

As I was getting my camera ready to take the picture, Tama-chan held out her hand toward me.

“Huh?” I looked at her hand blankly.

“You already have a picture of me, so why don’t you get in the shot with everyone?”

“…Oh, okay, thanks.”

I lined up with everyone, grateful for the straightforward gesture of kindness. We made two rows and waited for Tama-chan to get the camera ready. By the way, Takei, and only Takei, was already making his face. *Seriously, dude?*

Finally, Tama-chan said she was good to go. *Um, okay, silly face, right?* The other day, she’d given me a little tutorial on how to do it right, so I’d be fine if I followed her instructions. I nervously made my expression. *Never guessed that lecture would come in handy so soon…*

“Say cheese!”

As soon as the camera clicked, everyone rushed at Tama-chan asking how it came out. We gathered around the screen, and there the six of us were, each putting our all into making our own version of a funny face. You could find a picture like this on any real popular kid’s Instagram. W-wow. Was this really on my phone?

Kashiwazaki-san smiled as she looked at the picture. “No way! Tomozaki-kun is making the same face as Tama-chan!”

She was pointing at my face—which, since I was carefully following Tama-chan’s instructions, looked exactly like hers.

Seno-san and everyone else started laughing, and for a second, the mood was high.

Wh-what’s going on? It’s like having an Instagram made everyone instantly accept me.

Tama-chan returned my phone, and I was absentmindedly taking part in the conversation when Takei eagerly turned to me.

“That’s a great shot, Farm Boy! Send it to me, okay?”

“Huh? Uh, okay.”

I was happy someone wanted my picture, even if it was Takei, so I sent it to him on LINE without thinking much about it.

“Thanks! I’m posting this baby on Twitter!”

“…Huh?”

And so, thanks to my own carelessness, the happy story of my first good photo came to a tragic end when Takei put it on Twitter before I could get it on Instagram. *Takei. Come on.* You never know where your enemies may be lurking.

* * *

That day as I walked home with Nakamura’s group, I wondered what I should do.

It was Friday. That meant I was heading into the weekend, when I had to get two of my assignments done.

The three remaining assignments were a shot of Mizusawa wearing glasses, a shot of Izumi eating ice cream, and a shot of me with Kikuchi-san. I should probably prioritize the one of Mizusawa wearing glasses, since I had no idea how to get that one at school.

That meant I had to invite Mizusawa to hang out on either Saturday or Sunday, but the problem was, I didn’t know how to do it.

I mean, how did people invite each other to do stuff anyway? I’d asked Kikuchi-san to go to the movies together, but we had the Andi books in common. What did I have in common with someone as cool and good-looking as Mizusawa? Basically nothing. We were both human, I guess, and we went to the same high school and had the same part-time job. That was it. I didn’t think we had any of the same hobbies or anything.

But the longer I walked along doing nothing, the more time passed, and the fewer opportunities I had to extend an invitation at all.

Mizusawa and I were walking a few steps behind Nakamura and Takei, who were goofing around as usual. I turned to Mizusawa.

“Hey, I was wondering…”

“Yeah?” he answered distractedly. He was busy with his phone while I was struggling to get this damn assignment done!

“Are you free tomorrow or the next day?”

That got his attention. “What’s up? That came out of nowhere.”

“Uh, I know,” I said, fumbling for words. “I wanted to go

somewhere."

"…Where?"

Mizusawa frowned. Of course he did. Who asks someone to hang out without at least suggesting something? Ugh, I should have thought this through better.

"No, I mean, I don't have plans, so I thought we could just go wherever…"

"Aha!" he said, seeming to realize something. "So you're free tomorrow?"

He was leaning toward me—so of course, I leaned away. "Y-yeah, I'm free."

Mizusawa grinned. "Well, that's perfect, then."

"…Perfect?"

He thumped me on the back. "I'm going to a school festival."

"You are?"

"Yeah, Gumi's is this weekend. It's invitation only, but I've got two tickets."

"Oh, okay."

Mizusawa raised one eyebrow and smiled. "I was gonna go on Sunday with someone from work, but if you're free tomorrow, that's perfect."

"Ah, gotcha. Yeah, let's go then."

I was flustered by this unexpected turn of events, but I agreed. I probably wouldn't get a better chance than this. I'd never been to a festival at another school, but I was grateful he'd chosen a place to go.

"Okay, it starts around ten tomorrow. Let's figure out the details on LINE."

"Sounds good."

"We can scout out another school's festival to get ideas for ours."

"Y-yeah, true."

Mizusawa wasn't nervous at all; meanwhile, I was already getting uneasy thinking about the following day. Behold, the unbridgeable void between bottom-tier characters and normies.

"Okay, that's a plan."

"Uh, yeah."

Maybe Mizusawa noticed I was nervous, because he said in a joking tone, "By the way, Gumi goes to a girls' school."

"A g-girls' school…?"

That struck fear into my heart. *Wait a second, a girls' school? We're screwed, right? This is like final-dungeon-level, right?*

* * *

The next day, I found myself at Kitayono Station, where we'd agreed to meet. Apparently, Gumi-chan's school was by the station near my house.

Mizusawa sauntered out of the exit gate and waved at me. "Hey."

"H-hey."

I tried to answer with the same attitude, but I was so nervous about what we were about to do that I stuttered a little. Man, I thought I'd mastered greetings so well that I didn't even have to think about them anymore. Would I even be able to complete my assignment in this state? The festival itself was going to take everything I had. Plus, I highly doubted they'd be selling glasses there, so now what was I supposed to do?

"Ready to head over?"

Incidentally, we were both wearing our uniforms. I'd sent Mizusawa a LINE message asking him if people wore street clothes or school uniforms to this kind of thing. He said either was fine, but he'd do whatever I did, so I chose the uniform. That was because I still hadn't bought a warm, decent-looking jacket, and it was getting cold. According to Hinami, that was something fashionable people did before the weather changed, but as a fashion-backward individual, it occurred to me a bit too late.

"Here's your ticket."

"Oh, thanks."

He handed me a yellow slip of paper with *Tokusei High School Festival* printed on it. In the column labeled "*Host*," *Tsugumi Narita ☆* was written there in glittery, fluorescent ink. The rounded characters were exactly how I'd imagine a high school girl would write. When it came to that kind of stuff, Gumi-chan was a bit too trend-conscious.

A bunch of students were lined up around us, with some wearing uniforms and others in street clothes. They were probably headed for the festival.

"We've gotta take the bus," Mizusawa said, so we got on one

going toward the school.

After we reached our stop, Mizusawa used the map on his phone to lead us inside. *Damn it, I feel like I'm being escorted…*

Once we passed through a gate, which was decorated with handmade-looking garlands and paper flowers, and got onto the school grounds, I saw groups of kids in uniforms and street clothes milling around. There were probably slightly more girls than guys. And all the guys were from other schools, of course. They really came out in droves.

"Wanna just wander around for a while?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, making a strong effort to remain calm. Mizusawa frowned at me.

"…Are you nervous about something?"

"W-wouldn't anyone be?" I replied honestly.

Mizusawa cackled. "Relax those shoulders! Smile, man, smile!" He gave me one of his own easy smiles.

"O-okay."

I copied that expression, at least on the surface. *Okay, I think I just got 10 percent less nervous. Fake it till you make it and all that.*

We went into the school building and looked around. The walls of the hallway were covered with the kind of cute decorations you might expect to see at a girls' school, and each classroom had a sign outside. HAUNTED HOUSE, OKONOMIYAKI AND YAKISOBA, ESCAPE ROOM… I guess everyone had essentially the same ideas.

Mizusawa looked over the crowd in the hall.

"Right, let's go over the basics of hitting on girls," he said matter-of-factly.

I flinched. "Whoa, that's some lecture to be getting all of a sudden!"

"Look, why else would two guys go to a festival at a girls' school?"

"But you said we were doing recon…"

"Ha-ha-ha. That's just our cover story."

"What the hell…?"

I couldn't keep up. Was this ordinary life for a normie? Was that possible?

"Okay, it's not as big a deal as what you're thinking. All I mean is chatting up girls our age who we don't know. It's like when you join a new class, basically."

He thumped my shoulder. Honestly, what was he talking

about…?

"Well, since girls have never talked to me when I joined a new class, I guess I didn't need to be nervous."

"Ha-ha-ha! That works!" he said, laughing like I'd just said the most hilarious thing. Then he went on in a casual tone. "Just take it easy, all right?"

"I definitely can't."

This was all so sudden; I didn't understand half of what he was saying. None of it felt real, so I didn't know what to do. In part, I literally didn't know what to do, and just hearing the phrase *hit on girls* brought to mind a game for only the most popular of normies, the kings of communication.

"Okay," Mizusawa said, hesitating for a moment. "Look, hitting on girls is no risk, high return."

"No risk?"

To me, it seemed like nothing *but* risk.

"Just think about it. Say you try talking to a girl here and it gets awkward. Worst case, she happens to be in Gumi's class, and you'll probably hear about it from Gumi later. But what if no one knows about it? If you fail, that won't impact the rest of your life at all, right?"

His expression was completely laid-back.

"Um, that's…," I said, trying futilely to think of a counterargument. "I mean, you might be right, but…"

"I *am* right." Mizusawa gave an offhand smile. "Now imagine if it goes well, and you get her LINE. High return."

As he talked, he was smoothly tapping his phone screen. He pulled up the QR code screen on LINE and showed it to me. What sleight of hand was this?

"Come on, you're a little too good at pulling that up!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Guilty as charged." He returned to the home screen of his phone, smiling. "But listen. You've got nothing to lose and plenty to gain. How can you say no to that?"

"I do like having time at home for *Atafami*, so getting more LINE contacts isn't necessarily a good thing."

Mizusawa laughed, brushing me off.

"What are you talking about? If you don't wanna talk after, just don't make any dates."

"Guess that would work…"

Once again, I had no counterargument. Damn.

“The choice is yours, right? Play *Atafami* or go on a date with a girl. Wouldn’t you at least want the option to choose?”

“I guess…getting the contacts is at least backward compatible. You’re right.”

In logical terms, there was no question that if you could choose to have the freedom to choose, then that’s what you should do. The rationale was deeply instilled, so I couldn’t evade Mizusawa’s question.

“Exactly. So you’ve gotta do it, right?”

“Uh, is that the logical consequence?”

“Okay, let’s get started with our first group.”

“Huh?”

Mizusawa stepped away from me as lightly as a leaf floating on the wind and approached a pair of girls walking down the hallway. One had brown hair, and the other had black. They both looked like typical high school normies. *Seriously, Mizusawa?*

I tagged along timidly, half trying to hide behind him, and watched the situation unfold.

“Hi!” Mizusawa stepped in front of the girls and spread his arms out.

They turned to each other in surprise and then turned to him as he pointed to the cotton candy they were holding.

“That looks *amazing*!” He sounded like he was talking to his best friend. “Did you make it yourself to bring here?”

Both girls laughed.

“Good guess, but no! We bought it over there!”

“Oh, really? I thought you both were just really into cotton candy.”

“Ah-ha-ha, what does that even mean?”

“No, I just thought if you decided to bring it to the festival, you must be a huge fan.”

Less than a minute had passed since he started talking to them. Already, the mood was relaxing. I just stood there watching, scared out of my wits.

“Seriously, though, can I try some? It looks so fluffy.”

“What? No way!” the brown-haired girl said. Mizusawa shook his head calmly, then pointed to the black-haired girl.

“Oh, no, I was talking to your friend over here.”

“Ah-ha-ha, jerk!” The brown-haired girl laughed happily.

Mizusawa looked at the black-haired girl. “But really, do you

mind?"

"Uh, okay, I guess…"

She held the whole mass out to him, and he took a big bite. "Whoa, that…really tastes like cotton candy!" he said.

Both the girls laughed.

"Wonder why!" one of them said.

Huh? What is going on? This is getting sillier and sillier.

"Hey, what's his deal?" the black-haired girl asked Mizusawa.

"Who, me?"

"Is he by himself?"

Mizusawa threw me a glance before answering. "He's here with a friend, but they got separated. Actually, if you see him, can you tell us?"

"How do we know what he looks like?"

"I'll describe him. He has two eyes…"

"Oh, very helpful!"

"…three noses…"

The girls laughed at his smoothly delivered joke.

"Ah-ha-ha. Oh my god, stop!"

"So will you tell us if you see him?"

After another deadpan joke, the ball was in the girls' court.

"Ah-ha-ha, sure thing. If we see any guys with three noses, we'll let you know!"

"Okay, thanks! Oh, how will you get in touch if you find him? Write a letter?"

"Pfft, what the heck?"

"Hmm, then how about LINE?"

"What do you think?"

"Um…"

They looked at each other, unsure. Even though they were having fun a second ago, as soon as it came to exchanging contact info, shit got real.

But Mizusawa had a joke for that, too. "Yeah, snail mail is definitely better."

"Ah-ha-ha! No, I don't think so. Too much work!"

"Right. Plus, I don't want to tell you my address. So what do we do?"

"Yeah, let's do LINE. A little faster than the mail!"

"Got it. Here, scan this."

Unsurprisingly, the QR code was already pulled up on his

phone.

"God, you're shameless!"

"Perish the thought! I'm just concerned for this lost boy."

"Ah-ha-ha, right, I forgot."

I stared in a daze as the three of them exchanged LINE IDs. They all seemed to be having a great time.

I was at a total loss for words.

The girls waved good-bye to him like they were old friends as Mizusawa walked toward me, smug with success. Based on what I'd just witnessed, he'd earned it.

He strolled over to my side, turning toward me confidently. "So what's my grade?"

"A-plus, sir."

I had to bow down before his strength.

This guy was multiple levels higher than I'd even imagined.

* * *

"I underestimated you…"

We were both hungry, so we'd headed over to a stall labeled RAMEN and got two servings of what was clearly instant ramen dumped into bowls.

"That time went off without a hitch. Just consider me a master."

"Oh, uh-huh…"

After what I'd seen, he could say whatever he wanted, and I'd still be kissing his feet.

"So do you know what my thought process was?"

"Nope, no idea," I said without missing a beat. There's no way I could figure it out! I hadn't even caught a glimpse.

He chuckled with amusement. "Okay, I'll walk you through it."

"Please do."

He was the programmer, and I was the machine. I mean, this was an incredible skill for an amateur to learn. Just listening to him explain it should rack up a lot of EXP, so of course I would listen. He was an incredible mentor, but in a different way from Hinami.

"So the first step…is striking up a conversation."

I thought back to the exchange. "Uh, I do remember you saying 'hi.'"

Mizusawa frowned. “Did I?”

“You don’t remember?”

He shook his head.

“How can you not remember?”

Didn’t he say he was going to give me a walkthrough? I mean, I’d never talked to someone I didn’t know before, but the first word did seem important. And he already forgot.

“Well, it’s like, the first time you talk to someone, the words aren’t that important.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

“Listen,” he said, pausing to gather his thoughts. “It’s not really what you say—it’s how you say it.”

“…How you say it?”

He nodded. “Think about it. If you’re not expecting someone to start talking to you and then some guy you don’t know comes up and says something, do you think you’d even register what words he’s using?”

I played it out in my mind. *I’m walking along, and suddenly, a guy I don’t know comes up and starts talking to me…*

“No…probably not.”

“Right?” Mizusawa smirked. “The goal of the first word is to get their attention. As long as you do that, it doesn’t matter what you say. You could say *Hi* or *What are you doing?* or *There’s a goat over there*.”

“A goat…?”

I was thrown off by the example.

“Ha-ha-ha. The point is, anything goes. You want to get their attention, so what you really need to watch is where you’re standing, what face you’re making, how you talk, and stuff like that—not the exact words.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. That lined up with what I’d learned in my special training. “And your posture, too?”

“Yeah, exactly! You’re starting to catch on.” He nodded, looking pleased.

“Uh, thanks.”

He was acting very superior, but I couldn’t argue after watching him work.

“Once they notice you and you know they’re not going to just ignore you again, that’s when the conversation starts.”

“So anything you say before then is meaningless…” That was

news to me, and we were still only at the beginning. The heavenly realm really is different.

"After that, you can ask them questions or tease them about something they're holding—basically, have a random conversation."

"Wait a second. What do you mean, 'a random conversation'? That's the hard part."

I'd let my mind wander for one second, and he'd left me in the dust. This is why people who are good at everything are so hard to deal with.

"Ha-ha-ha. Okay, I'll teach you the basics. It's actually really simple. If you make a joke about something there in the moment, like the cotton candy with those two girls, it's easy for them to respond."

"Ah, I see."

"Chances are good they're already interested."

I understood what he was saying intuitively. If they'd just bought cotton candy, then they probably had something to say about it.

"Then once you've got the conversation going, the next big step is… You know how I asked for a bite? That's a little technique of mine."

"Technique?"

I tried to figure out what that would accomplish, even before he explained it. That would help me learn better.

Maybe it had to do with getting close to them by eating the same food? This was all a bit advanced for me, so I couldn't think of a very good answer.

What would be the result of asking for a bite?

I waited for Mizusawa to reveal the answer.

"Basically, you take control of the conversation."

"How so?"

"Okay, so picking up girls means we're the ones approaching them, which puts us in the position of chasing after them."

"Yeah, I can see that."

It was like a guerrilla-warfare approach to saying, *I want to talk to you*.

"But by asking them for something, like a bite of their food, you can even out the relationship again. You can pretend you approached them because you wanted some of their cotton candy."

"O-oh…"

I definitely hadn't expected that answer. Man, the difficulty level of this conversation was steadily rising. What looked at first glance like casual joking around was actually a fine tuning of the relationship. Unlike Nakamura's power plays, this normie skill was almost too delicate.

"The instant they sense you're flirting because you want positive attention, they lose interest. You have to control the pace of the conversation."

I parsed that information. "And that's what you call taking control of the conversation?"

Mizusawa smiled. "You're catching on. That's about right. If you want her to be more interested in you, you have to stay in the driver's seat."

"Huh…"

I realized Hinami had made me do something similar in my assignments. Messing with people and pushing through my opinion were prime examples. If I did it enough, I'd have control of the conversation…I think. Hmm. Mizusawa's teachings and Hinami's teachings were linking up now.

"That's why when the one girl said she wouldn't give me her cotton candy, I said I was talking to her friend, not to her. That's another way to keep in charge. It showed I was the one doing the choosing, so I could keep directing the conversation."

"Y-you were really putting that much thought into everything you said…?"

There was so much meaning in every action, I was starting to feel like I was watching a street performer.

But I still had questions. "Okay, but they must have known you didn't really come over because you wanted cotton candy, right?"

He could pretend all he wanted, but it was obvious that he was trying to hit on them. They'd never believe it was just about the cotton candy, so wasn't his whole strategy ultimately pointless?

"Yes, that's true, but…" Mizusawa's voice was oddly full of emotion. He smiled and tilted his head before continuing. "When you talk to a girl, the pretense is important. This part may be a little hard to understand."

"Really…?"

Mizusawa went on at a pleasant clip. "I did the same thing when we were exchanging LINE IDs, remember? I said I wanted them to send me a message on LINE if they saw your friend, and I

said LINE would be better than snail mail, right?"

"Uh-huh…"

"We weren't really talking about your friend, either, right?"

It was starting to make sense. I could see the similarity. "The way you did it made it easier for them to give you their LINE info…," I said, replaying the conversation in my mind. Just when it seemed like they were going to turn him down, he'd made a casual joke and rallied the mood to his side.

"Exactly! The whole song and dance may seem pointless on the surface, but it's really crucial."

I was nodding nonstop, almost against my will.

The two girls didn't genuinely share their LINE info with him so they could get in touch if they found my imaginary friend, and they must have known Mizusawa never had any intention of exchanging pen-and-ink letters. But the facade had made it easier to trade contact info. Interesting. The proof is in the pudding. Or something.

"The next key to remember…is the fact that Mako-chan gave me a bite of her cotton candy."

"M-Mako-chan…?"

"The black-haired girl."

"You're already on a first-name basis?" I smiled forlornly, to which Mizusawa responded with a matter-of-fact nod.

"That's not really important. Getting back to my point…"

"Oh right."

His baseline was just too different from mine. Calling girls by their first name was apparently normal for him.

"…the fact that she gave me a bite of her cotton candy indicates either that she was letting down her guard a little, or that she wasn't too guarded to start with. Either way, she was easy to approach."

"O-oh, that's what it means…"

When you think about it, sharing cotton candy meant an indirect you-know-what with someone you just met. That would be tough for me.

"After that, Mako-chan asked what you were doing. This is the most important point so far."

"Oh. W-wait, what's so important about that?"

Shit. Everything he'd said so far had caught me off guard, but now I was completely lost.

He grinned. "You can't guess? Okay. Up till then, I was the one

asking all the questions, but that was when she asked me about myself for the first time. Meaning she started to show interest in me. That's a really good sign."

"Huh… Interesting."

Once again, he took me from baffled to convinced in a single bound. Was he a magician or something?

"Once I traded LINE IDs with Mako-chan, who was more open, it was easier to convince her friend to share hers, too, right? Basically, if you can get one girl interested and then get her info, the bar will be lower for the other one."

Having finished his explanation, he stood in front of me with his usual casual smile.

"Do you get the general idea?"

"Yes, wise teacher. Your student thanks you for your instruction and encouragement."

A whole new world was opening up before me.

* * *

We finished our ramen and were relaxing for a minute while we had something to drink.

"So do you have any questions? Ask me anything. I mean, you're working on a lot of stuff right now, aren't you?"

"Uh, yeah…" I thought for a minute. I definitely felt like I could get an immeasurable amount of EXP from Mizusawa in this game. I'd better think carefully about what to ask him.

As I thought about the parts that were still bothering me, I hit on a question that had nothing to do with how to become a normie.

There was an underlying problem with all this.

"Hey…I thought you liked Hinami."

"…What kind of question is that?" He gave me a quick, surprised look. Then without changing his expression, he answered my question. "I do."

"Oh, okay." I wasn't ready for such a point-blank answer. Now I was the one caught off guard.

He looked at me, unruffled. "But what's that got to do with this?"

"A lot, I'd say," I shot back.

How could he be so blasé about it? Especially when he'd just

been majorly hitting on two girls! This was the problem with normies.

"I mean, if you like Hinami, should you be going around to festivals trying to pick up girls?"

I did my best getting my feelings across, even if my communication skills weren't the greatest.

Mizusawa frowned, troubled. "Well…let me put it this way. I'm not dating Hinami right now, am I?"

"N-no, but…still."

"I like someone, but I don't have a girlfriend. So I can do what I want and have fun. That's all. Is there something wrong with that?" he asked point-blank.

"Um…"

He seemed so certain now that I wondered if maybe he was right. He wasn't betraying anyone, after all.

"It just feels like you're…not being faithful or something…"

"Faithful, huh?" Mizusawa said, sighing. "Where do you get that way of thinking from?"

"…Uh…"

"You've never been in a relationship, have you?"

"Uh, no…but why do you want to know where it comes from?"

As I stood there floundering, Mizusawa peered into my eyes. "My guess is that you got it from some manga or anime or something you saw a long time ago."

"…Th-that's…"

I wanted to say it wasn't true, but I couldn't completely deny his point. I didn't have a better answer. It was just a vague intuition. In which case, Mizusawa might be right.

He kept looking at me. "That kind of love story is just a fantasy. In my opinion, it's meaningless to believe in fiction and try to apply it wholesale to real life. But that's just me."

"Fiction, huh?"

When I thought about it, I realized everything I knew about love did come from stories. I had no way of arguing. When Mizusawa said real-life love was different and he felt perfectly fine hitting on girls even though he liked someone else, I had nothing to base a counterargument on. Fine, but still, most people wouldn't do that. They wouldn't flirt with other girls.

He probed me with a look, then leaned forward confidently. "Now I'll ask you a question."

“Um, okay…”

“What do you think makes a guy attractive?”

“Uh, that came out of nowhere.” This conversation had taken a sudden turn.

“I know. What’s your answer?”

I thought about what Hinami had told me and what I’d experienced myself. Then I put it all together to create an answer that was mine. “Well, he takes care of his appearance, and he’s chill… Let’s see, what else? He’s good at controlling the conversation, maybe?”

I shrewdly added the point that Mizusawa had just taught me to Hinami’s lessons.

“Hey, not as bad as I was expecting! Right on all three counts.”

Once again, he was getting kinda high-handed, but I couldn’t argue with the master.

“Th-thanks.”

True enough, not long ago, the only answer I would probably have come up with was *He’s smart*. So in that sense, maybe I had advanced a bit.

“But you’re still missing something,” Mizusawa said pompously. “That’s all surface stuff. There’s one more thing that’s even more basic.”

“There is?” I echoed.

He gave me a cocky smile, then answered with utter confidence.

“Attractive guys attract people.”

I gaped at him silently.

Eventually, my shock morphed into a wry smile.

“Well, that’s very to the point.”

Mizusawa cackled happily. “Maybe, but it’s true. Look, you listed three requirements just now, right? We’ll assume taking care of your appearance is a must, but if you’ve got girls who are interested, staying cool comes naturally, and it’s easy to control the conversation, too, because you start out with the upper hand.”

“Yeah, I can see that…”

What he was saying wasn’t that complicated. Basically, once you start attracting people, it makes you more attractive.

“Also, your market value goes up, so girls think if they don’t act fast, someone else will get you. So the hotter you are, the hotter you become. It’s like a spiral of hotness.”

“A spiral of hotness…?”

He was saying all this with the utmost seriousness…but everything made sense.

The conversation was getting off track, but I had a question. “Doesn’t that mean it’s impossible for nonhot guys to become hot?”

If hot guys just got hotter and hotter, that didn’t seem to leave much room for nonhot guys to make a comeback.

Mizusawa nodded. “Pretty much,” he said.

“What?”

He smiled jokingly. “Nah, I’m just messing with you.”

“Hey!”

What was with the feint? Was that really necessary right now?

“Ha-ha-ha. It’s simple. Just do as the hot guys do. That’ll give you a fighting chance.”

“Oh, okay.”

I hadn’t directly experienced being attractive, but I could understand it from other contexts. When I felt unsure or nervous, just taking on a more solid stance made me feel more relaxed. Then it showed in my actions and tone. It was just what Hinami had taught me—fake it till you make it.

So the same structure applied to the abstract concept of “hotness,” too. Look at that, I just broke it down to concepts I already know.

Mizusawa leaned back in his chair and continued. “And once you start attracting people, you don’t have to pretend anymore.”

“Are you talking about yourself?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Maybe.” He laughed softly. When I saw this side of him, it was easier to forgive his cocky attitude. “Basically, girls fall for guys who they think have a higher market value than themselves,” he said.

“Huh.”

“So my plan is to raise my value, play around, stay cool…and slowly get Hinami interested in me.”

“Th-that’s where all this leads…?”

So that’s why he asked me that question out of the blue. I get it. “So basically, messing around with a bunch of different girls isn’t a problem because you’re not being unfaithful. You’re trying to

increase your hotness level so Hinami will decide she's interested in you."

Mizusawa scrunched his brows together. "No, that's not quite it."

"It's not?"

Damn, I'd been perfectly convinced.

Mizusawa gave me a teasing smile. "No. I mean, I'm not just doing all this for Hinami. A big part of this is that it's fun for me. I mean, I am a guy, after all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I shot back. He said some weird stuff when he was joking around.

He cackled before answering me. "What it means is, I'm playing around because I want to. It's entirely separate from the thing with Hinami… That's one part of it anyway."

He grinned confidently, then pointed at me.

"The other part is, I'm not doing it so Hinami will *decide* she's interested in me. I'm doing it to *make* her interested in me."

"Uh, okay…"

He was joking around expertly, and his expression was so relaxed and in control that I couldn't help thinking he really was pretty cool. *Huh? Wait a second, am I falling for him, too?*

* * *

"Oh, Mizusawa-san and Tomozaki-san! You came!"

After we left the ramen shop, we headed over to the haunted house run by Gumi-chan's class. She was sitting next to the reception table, fiddling with her phone. Looks like she didn't plan to lift a finger at the school festival, either.

"Hey, look, you grew antennae!" Mizusawa said, looking at the pair of bunny ears on her head. She did have a bit of a Playboy-bunny vibe, so they suited her perfectly.

"Nope! They're my cute bunny ears. ♡" She touched her headband.

"So you've got four ears now?"

"Ah-ha-ha, yup!" she said, slumping lazily in her chair.

I watched her, thinking I might as well say what I'd been

thinking a second ago. It was the Tomozaki Method with a dash of jokey Mizusawa.

"So you're not doing any work at the festival, either, huh?" I succeeded in the delivery well enough to get a grin from her.

"Hey, I don't work *anywhere*!"

"Why do you sound so proud of that?" Mizusawa replied right away.

Man, if he'd given me a chance, I might have said the same thing, but his response time was too quick. In battles, the people who act fastest get the advantage, so maybe I'd better work on my lightning reflexes to make up for my low strength.

"Anyway, go on in! It's not very scary, though!"

"If you're saying that about your own booth… Yikes," I jumped in to say.

Gumi-chan stuck out her tongue at me. "Hey, what's your class gonna do? It's at the end of second semester, right? Your school festival, I mean."

"We're doing a café where you can read manga. And a play," Mizusawa said.

Gumi-chan lit up. "That sounds really cool! I'll try to make it if I can."

"Gumi-chan, that's what you say when you don't plan to go…," I said.

"That's not true!"

I was managing to get a line in here and there.

"Just the two of you, right? This way!"

When our conversation wound down, one of her classmates led us into the haunted house.

We walked slowly down the path. It was cramped and dark, but not so dark that we couldn't see ahead of us.

"Boo!"

"…"

I ignored the guy who shouted at me from the side, since I already knew he was there.

"Ooo~!"

"…Okay."

We could see the next person, too, so Mizusawa wasn't startled, either.

That happened a couple more times, and then we were at the exit.

“You survived~.” Gumi-chan stood up and walked over to us. “So? How was it?”

I said exactly what came to mind. “Um…I think the most shocking part of this whole thing was the fact that you got out of your chair.”

“Ah-ha-ha. Yeah, I getcha,” she said lethargically. “Hey, my shift at the reception table is over! Wanna go to the dining hall with me?”

“We just had ramen,” Mizusawa said.

“Oh!” Gumi-chan said, her eyes sparkling. “Then it’s time for dessert, right? That’s perfect! I was just thinking I wanted some ice cream.”

“You’re quite an optimist…”

Mizusawa cackled at my joke. “Just think of her as a human vacuum cleaner, Fumiya.”

“Ah, g-gotcha… Wouldn’t want that for my boss.”

Gumi-chan looked at us in confusion. “I don’t know what that means, and I’m not sure I want to.”

“You’re just imagining things! Let’s go get dessert. Where’s the dining hall?”

“I knew I could count on you, Mizusawa-san. ♡ It’s over there!”

That was how we ended up heading over to the dining hall with Gumi-chan after touring her crappy haunted house.

I’d been observing the conversation with the points Mizusawa explained earlier in mind. Even though he accepted her suggestion that we should all get ice cream, he still seemed to be the one in control of making the decision. Amazing technical skill.

* * *

“So did you meet any cute girls?” Gumi-chan asked languidly as she ate her cup of vanilla ice cream. She was going to melt all over the table before her ice cream did.

“Ha-ha-ha. Why would you assume we’re here for that?”

“I mean, isn’t that why two guys usually come to a girls’ school?” she said, like it was completely obvious.

Almost exactly what Mizusawa had said. Must be a thing.

“We haven’t talked to that many yet. I’d say we’re doing so-so.”

“That’s what I thought! You’re the cabbage-wrap type, aren’t you, Mizusawa-san?!”

“I think you’re probably the only person in the world who actually uses that expression.”

I listened to their fast-paced banter, grinning. I think what she meant by “the cabbage-wrap type” was that he seemed like a warm and fuzzy vegetarian on the outside, but he was actually a carnivorous wolf inside. But by the time I’d figured that out, they were on to something else.

At this point, I could inject little comments here and there in fast-paced conversations, but beyond a certain level, I was completely immobilized. This was one of those situations. These two spoke at lightning speed. I think that like Takei and Nakamura, Gumi-chan just has what it takes. She’s a natural.

“What about you, Tomozaki-san?”

Suddenly, the conversational spear was pointed in my direction. But I’d already been searching for a crack where I could slip into the dialogue, so I wasn’t that flustered.

“I don’t really hit on girls…”

“Figures!” Gumi-chan said, her eyes wide. “But a lot of girls at our school are looking for boyfriends, so you’ve got plenty of opportunities!”

“R-really?”

“Definitely. You don’t have a girlfriend right now, do you?”

“Uh, no. Nope.”

I pulled myself up, doing my best to hide how the sudden question had flustered me. It wasn’t just that I didn’t have one right now—I’d never had one ever. I didn’t have the legs for leaping right into a conversation about love.

“Then you should check out my class! We’ve got tons of cute girls who want boyfriends!”

“You do, huh?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. What would get me a passing score on the normie rubric?

Earlier, Mizusawa had said attractive guys attract people, so what would an attractive guy say in this situation? Maybe I should think it through and give it a shot. Well, he probably wouldn’t be desperate for a girlfriend, so he might say something like, *That’s not why I came*. But that was more like something I’d say anyway, which meant it was wrong. Kinda sad, but it’s true.

In which case, the best approach would probably be to act like Mizusawa and make a joke out of it. Something like this?

"…Maybe I should take another trip through your crappy haunted house."

I aimed for a light, casual, Mizusawa-esque tone. I'd thought about my answer too much before saying it, so there was a weird pause in the conversation, but I think it was just short of unnatural. Now to wait for the verdict.

Gumi-chan gave me a weak smile, her upper body still melted onto the table.

"Ah-ha-ha! So you're the cabbage-wrap type, too!"

"I told you, Gumi, no one says that."

"Okay, fine, I get it!"

Once again, Mizusawa had retaken control of the conversation.

But hey, look at that! My hot-guy imitation got me labeled as a cabbage wrap. I wouldn't even say I'm a vegetarian—I'm more like a microorganism that breaks down the nutrients in dirt.

So I'd succeeded in impersonating a hot guy—maybe. But was that a step forward?

* * *

After that, I was pulled into exactly the scenario I most feared.

Gumi-chan had gone to enjoy the festival, so Mizasawa and I were walking down the hallway when suddenly, he took my arm.

"Okay, your turn now."

"What?"

He walked up behind a pair of girls, pulling me along with him. *Wait a second, are you serious? You want me to take part in this?*

Once he got fairly close to the pair, he let go of my arm and walked around to the right side. "You go left," he said, leaving me behind. *What? We're gonna start talking from both sides at once?*

I followed his instructions and approached from the opposite side— Nah, like hell I did. Instead, I took up a position on his right. I mean, let's be realistic. That was a big ask for me.

Mizusawa glanced over, smiled wryly, and cheerfully started talking.

"Heya!"

I followed his lead and said "H-heya" as clearly as possible. But

my nervousness made my voice kinda mumbly, and I couldn't control my intonation like I normally did.

One of the girls was wearing a sparkly beret, while the other was wearing glasses. Very school-festival-ish.

Mizusawa confirmed they were looking at him, then pointed at the pince-nez glasses one of them was wearing.

"Those glasses are. *So* cool," he said, putting a weird pause before *so*.

The girl giggled a little. "Uh, I'm not sure that's a compliment!"

"No, seriously, they look really nice on you!"

"You think so? Um, who are you?"

Starting out, the girl seemed a bit distant. I listened fearfully to the conversation, a weak smile on my face. How did Mizusawa manage to stay so relaxed?

The girl with the beret wasn't reacting very positively, either. She was looking at us and smiling, but she seemed more puzzled than happy. *Huh. Well, I'm not surprised it doesn't always go off without a hitch.*

Mizusawa pointed at a nearby classroom and made small talk. "Have you been to the haunted house yet?"

"No way!" the girl with the glasses answered.

"You should check it out. It's *terrifying* how unscary it is."

The girl burst out laughing. "But that's the most important part!"

"Ha-ha-ha. You can totally see all the ghosts."

That got rid of the tension. He was unbelievable. Even if they didn't go for him right away, he figured out how to get their guard down.

As usual, I was just standing by his side watching…until I realized I should probably say something.

Honestly speaking, this was all so new that it felt impossible, but I had chosen to give this game my all. You gotta try new things and get that EXP. This dungeon was obviously beyond my level, but on the other hand, Mizusawa had gone to the trouble of setting the stage for me.

I decided to try playing along. "Y-yeah, it seriously is not scary!"

"Really?" the pince-nez girl answered smoothly after my awkward stammering. The mood wasn't really taking off. *Is this going badly? I think it's going badly.*

“Y-yeah! You wouldn’t think so, but it’s really not scary at all…”

“I wouldn’t, huh?”

I thought that phrase would work again, but my spirit was crushed. Yeah, I definitely wasn’t ready for this.

In which case, I decided it would be better for me to cut it out with the stupid comments and watch the master. Maybe get a word in here and there if I could. Otherwise, I’d never survive this.

“Did you go to any good booths?” Mizusawa asked.

“Um, well…the strikeout game was fun.”

“I didn’t know they had one of those here. Are there prizes?”

“Yes! If you hit all the squares, you get an iPhone cover or something. All I got was this.”

She took off her glasses and showed them to Mizusawa. Man, they were having a full-on conversation.

“So that’s where you got them!” He calmly took the glasses from her and started scrutinizing them. “These look like something from the dollar store.”

“Ah-ha-ha. They probably are.”

Suddenly, I had a flash of inspiration. Even if I couldn’t hit on girls like Mizusawa did, I should be able to complete my assignment.

So I said, “I b-bet those would look good on you, too, Mizusawa.” I stuttered a little, but I think I managed to sound casual enough.

He grinned and put them on his face. “What do you think?”

“Wow, they do look good!” the girl said.

“Hey, I’m not sure that’s a compliment.”

“Ah-ha-ha.”

“B-but they really do look good on you!”

“I agree!”

“What do you think, Fumiya?” Mizusawa smiled and turned toward me.

I summoned my cheerful voice. “Definitely, definitely! Want me to take a picture?”

I held up my phone.

Yeah, pince-nez probably weren’t what Hinami had imagined, but they were a classic category of glasses. Which meant if I took the picture, the assignment would be complete. She couldn’t quibble over this.

“Ha-ha-ha. Okay, go ahead.”

Mizusawa gamely played along. But of course, he kept trying to wave over the original owner of the glasses. “Come on, get in the picture!” Oh, this guy. The other girl was standing there awkwardly, like she didn’t know what to do.

“Okay, say cheese!”

“Cheese!”

“Cheese!”

I succeeded in getting my shot of Mizusawa wearing glasses. *Will this be acceptable for you, Hinami-san?*

“Show me!” Mizusawa said, looking at my screen. He seemed to be having a great time with this.

“Oh, nice! Here, look!”

The girl with the glasses came over to see, and the two of them gushed over it a little. And then…

“Okay, I’ll send it to you. What should I use to send it?”

“LINE works.”

With that, the photo I took for my assignment was twisted into an excuse for exchanging LINE info. *Tell me, is this guy OP or what?*

* * *

Thus, I experienced Gumi-chan’s haunted house and Mizusawa’s pickup skills, and before I knew it, evening had come.

After the glasses incident, Mizusawa hit on some more girls, and even though he was just doing it in between checking out festival booths, he still managed to get about ten LINE IDs. If he’d been focusing his full energy on it, I had no doubt this guy would have gone home with twenty or thirty.

We’d left the school grounds and were waiting in front of the main gate for the bus.

“Too bad. I really wanted to see you doing some flirting,” Mizusawa said.

“No way, getting dragged in that one time was plenty for me…”

“Ha-ha-ha. Really?”

Actually, it was more than plenty. “I’m not quite at that level yet…”

“That level, huh…?” Mizusawa looked up at the sky in thought, then said, “You’re doing some kind of self-help book, right?

Something about, like, self-improvement or 'boosting your level' or whatever?"

"Uh, I guess…"

Hinami was teaching me everything, actually, but she had told me once she essentially had a self-help book in her mind. In that sense, he wasn't wrong.

"Is it one of those books that's like, *What girls really want is to talk, so you should ask them a lot of questions*? They tell you to ask them about themselves, let them talk, etcetera, etcetera? My image of those is kinda 'eh.'"

"Um…yeah, maybe."

Since I'd never read one of those books, I didn't know if he was right, but I decided to vaguely go along with him. Hinami had started out with more basic skills, like fixing my gloomy way of talking, but let's just forget about that. It's depressing.

But anyway, what was so "eh" about the things he'd mentioned?

"Do you think that advice is wrong?"

He hesitated for a moment. "No, I don't think it's *wrong*, per se. But based on my experience, it's not right, either."

"So it's neither?"

He nodded. "I agree that when you're with a girl, you need to make it fun. And listening to her talk about whatever she wants to talk about is an important means to that end."

"I see."

"But it's not enough on its own."

"You need more?"

"Yeah. If you ask lot of questions and avoid awkward pauses, you'll have a conversation. But that's just the bare minimum. You're not gonna hook up or anything."

"Hook up…"

In—in what sense…?

"You know what I mean, right?"

"Uh, b-basically. I think." I nodded fearfully.

"Simply put—it's not enough to get the girl." He spoke slowly, his eyebrows raised. His tone was light, but the words behind it carried far more weight.

"I—I can see that…"

The force of his speech had convinced me. I guess that's what it means to be a normie. How was a high schooler not intimidated by

the idea of “getting the girl”? He oozed confidence. Someone as popular as him just had way more experience.

“If you only listen to her talk, you’ll have a decent conversation. But in the end, if you want her to come after you and to really reel her in, you need to convince her you’re worth it.”

“Worth it…” That was ridiculous. Convincing a girl of that sounded like a fairly high bar.

“Basically, for us guys, being harmless isn’t enough.”

“Harmless…”

Strangely, the word stung.

Mizusawa seemed to be enjoying his lecture now. He was a captivating speaker, and he shifted from one expression to the next in an attractive way.

“It’s a surefire path to the friend zone.”

“You mean you have to pursue her a little?”

“Exactly. Or—what was it? Hexactly.”

“Hey, that’s Hinami’s line.”

Mizusawa cackled happily. “You’re getting fairly good at listening, so now you need to work on the attack.”

“Huh?” I said, surprised.

Mizusawa’s eyebrows shot up, like he was surprised by my surprise. “What, you hadn’t noticed? I mean, you’ve been asking me about myself a lot more lately, and your questions are more specific.”

“…Oh.”

Now that he mentioned it, I could think of lots of examples. After all, in the six-plus months since I met Hinami, I’d spent every day coming up with things to talk about with specific people and then starting those conversations when I could. When I had lunch with Nakamura’s group, for instance, I did that a lot.

And since I’d taken the trouble to come up with the topics in advance, they were specific. Props to Hinami.

“You’ve gotten a lot better at responding naturally, too.”

“I have?” I asked stupidly.

Mizusawa smirked. “You didn’t notice that, either? You’re speaking way clearer, and you’ve learned to dial down your responses so they don’t seem exaggerated.”

“…Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

That must be the result of my training, too. I’d recorded myself

speaking and then listened to the recordings, revamping whatever didn't match my image of my own voice. I'd copied the speech patterns of well-spoken people on TV, and even of Mizusawa himself, and then recorded myself again and fixed what needed fixing.

From an ordinary person's perspective, it probably looks like a dull, repetitive process, but as they say, that's what it takes to git gud. When I applied that practice to Hinami's exercises, that's what I got. And now my work was slowly bearing fruit.

"I realize how much effort that took. You jumped from an awkward loser all the way to where you are now…," Mizusawa said, laying his hand on my shoulder with a thump. "You must have put in some real steady work."

I gulped, and he laughed at the look on my face.

"You can try to hide it, but I see you."

He tapped the middle of my chest with his finger. The gesture somehow reminded me of Hinami.

"I've got a soft spot for hard workers like you." He smiled, and his eyes were kind and accepting.

"Well…thanks."

"See, you felt it, right? That's the kind of thing you want to say to girls."

"Y-you jerk…"

"Hey, here's the bus."

I sputtered out an incoherent answer, completely shaken up. What a goddamn playboy. If I were a girl right now, he would have had me, no question about it.

He walked briskly over to the bus, looking so damn laid-back that I could have hit him.

"Wait a—"

I jogged to catch up. *Ugh, what am I, his girlfriend?!*

* * *

The next day was Sunday.

After I finished my shift at Karaoke Sevens, I stopped at a café in Omiya.

I was sitting alone drinking orange juice when someone came trotting in through the entrance…

"I-I'm sorry I'm late!"

She was a wood sprite, wearing a fluffy white sweater under a cozy-looking, woolly gray coat. The feminine outfit looked frighteningly good on her.

"I-it's okay," I answered, my eyes glued to her.

You guessed it—Kikuchi-san and I had agreed to meet in Omiya to talk about the play after we got off work.

She sat down and ordered a cup of tea.

When it arrived, we both let out a deep breath. "Well, um, what should we talk about first?" I said.

Kikuchi-san made a little bow in my direction. "Um, thank you for everything on Friday."

"Huh?" I was confused for a second.

“For telling the class about my manuscript…,” she said softly.

Oh right. “No problem at all. Don’t even think about it. I wanted to do the play myself anyway.”

She gave me a slightly surprised glance. Then she smiled, looking very grown-up. “…Still, thank you.”

For her, thanking me was just the right thing to do, I think. “… You’re welcome.”

Which was why I gave in. The topic turned to the details of the play.

“Looks like we’ll be casting it next week already…,” I said.

“Y-yes, I think so.” Kikuchi-san laced her fingers together nervously.

Hmm. Moving this conversation along is probably my job, then. “Did you have a chance to write up the summary that we talked about on Friday?”

“Oh, yes. I did. Here it is.”

She pulled a clear plastic folder out of her handbag, and there were several sheets of paper inside. She took one out and handed it to me.

“Thanks. Um…”

I glanced down at the paper. In addition to a simple outline of the story, there were descriptions of the characters as well as notes about how big their part was and how long their speeches were. She’d concisely summarized the whole play.

Huh. She’d gone the extra mile to make the character descriptions, so she must have had casting in mind when she wrote it. She really was on the ball.

“Wow…this looks great.”

“Really?”

I nodded. It was conceited of me to act like I could judge her work, but I had to keep us moving. *Lord, please forgive the impudence of a weakling.*

“Yeah. This will let people choose parts and stuff even if they haven’t read the whole thing.”

Kikuchi-san took out a copy for herself. “Depending on who takes which part, I’ll need to adjust the script here and there, don’t you think?”

“Um…you think so? I guess you’re right.”

Honestly speaking, I hadn’t considered that, so my answer was pretty vague. But she was right—she’d written a short story, but

now she was adapting it as a class play. Adjusting the mood based on who played who was one option.

"Yes. And how much time do we have?"

"Uh, I'm not sure. I'll check."

"If we need to shorten it, we could leave out this part…" Kikuchi-san looked down, concentrating intently. Unlike the soft expression she got when she read books, her eyes were sharp and perceptive.

I wouldn't say that look was entirely surprising, but there was something fresh about it. Kikuchi-san usually observed the world from a calm, outside perspective, but now, calm though she still was, the passion in her eyes was clear. It was fascinating, and I couldn't help gazing at her face.

The world she had created was about to open its boundaries to the outside.

What could I do to help that happen?

I didn't know anything about making up stories. I wasn't well versed in theater. So what could I do?

I thought about it for a few minutes and finally arrived at a conclusion. I was only able to come up with it because of the life-conquering skills I'd recently learned.

I was sure of it.

This was the best way to translate Kikuchi-san's quiet passion for the rest of the class.

* * *

After we'd discussed the story outline, the characters, and everything else we could think of about the play, the conversation turned to the school festival as a whole.

"I'm really looking forward to the festival," I said, and I meant it now. I could have added *Aren't you?* at the end, but I knew very well not everyone felt that way about these things.

But Kikuchi-san smiled. "Yes, so am I." Then she opened her mouth slightly, like she'd just discovered something. "It's strange, isn't it?" she said.

"How so?" I said.

"I didn't care about the school festival at all until this year…but now that I've gotten involved a little, my perspective has changed

completely."

"…Yeah."

I'd experienced the same emotion.

When your situation changes, your surroundings change, too. When you stand in a different place, everything looks different. But when your frame of mind changes, those changes are even more pronounced.

"I think I know what you mean," I said.

"Yes…I had a feeling you'd experienced it yourself." Kikuchi-san placed one hand on top of the other and smiled kindly.

I remembered something. "Oh yeah."

She gave me a confused look.

"Would you take a picture with me? We can get the overview you wrote in the picture, too. Kind of like a promise to give this play our all."

Of course, taking a photo with her was one of my assignments, but I really did want to capture the moment. Huh. I was starting to understand those people who always have their cameras out.

"A picture…?" Kikuchi-san thought about it for a moment, then nodded and smiled. "Okay, that's fine."

"G-great. So…"

I pulled up the camera on my phone. Right. We were sitting across from each other at the table, but that wouldn't work if we wanted to take a picture together.

I had no choice but to accept the challenge.

"Um, mind if I come over there?" I pointed to the empty spot next to her on the couch. She tilted her head, a little flustered.

"You mean…next to me?" she finally said.

Her voice was shaking, and the last few words trailed off into near silence. As she glanced hesitantly at me, I noticed the mesmerizingly long curl of her eyelashes.

"Um, yeah."

My voice was shaking, too; her nervousness was contagious. She nodded, seeming to have made up her mind, and moved the slightest bit to the side. Then she set both her hands on her lap and sat up stiffly.

"O-okay…"

I got up the nerve to stand and move to her side.

We'd never been this close before. The magical sprite was a mere ten centimeters from me.

A gentle scent tickled my nostrils, and the slight hitch in her breathing made my heart race.

I pulled up the camera on my phone and moved it around until we were both in the frame.

That's when it happened.

"Oh!"

Our hands touched on the sofa.

"S-sorry."

"Um, i-it's okay. I'm sorry…"

We both jerked our hands back. An extremely awkward silence followed.

Kikuchi-san tried to distract us from what just happened. "Uh, um, you were taking a picture, right?"

"Uh, yeah…"

"R-right…"

I succeeded in snapping the shot, although we avoided each other's eyes the whole time. My assignment was complete, but by this point, that was the least of my worries.

"I-I'll send it to you later, okay?"

"O-okay…"

So went our conversation, in fits and starts of awkward breaths and stuttered words.

I mean, that was a real shock.

Up till then, I'd thought of Kikuchi-san as some sort of heavenly creature, but when our hands touched—when for the first time, her human warmth reached me through our fingertips, and I felt her presence—my face was on fire.

* * *

It was Monday morning, and I was in Sewing Room #2.

Seven days had passed since Hinami gave me the photo-quest assignment, which meant this was the last day of the quest.

"Well, you're doing nicely, aren't you? Look at all those likes you're getting."

"Y-yeah, I guess…"

We were looking at the trends for the photos I'd posted on Instagram. The one I'd put up on Friday was getting an especially good reaction, even though Takei had posted the same one on

Twitter. It was a great picture, after all. Of course, that "especially good reaction" was six likes instead of two.

"Gotta say, I wasn't expecting *those* glasses…"

"S-sorry about that." I was a little ashamed at her sarcasm, but at least she accepted the picture.

By the way, I didn't post the photo of me and Kikuchi-san from Sunday. I did show it to Hinami, but Kikuchi-san had said she didn't want me to put it on Instagram. Honestly, I would have been embarrassed to post it myself, so I was glad for that.

"It looks like some people from our class are following you even though you didn't tell them about the account, right?"

"…Yeah."

It was true. I'd only signed up a few days earlier, but already, a couple of people were following me—though I wasn't sure if they'd found my account because one of their friends liked one of my pictures, or whether the app recommended they follow me, or what. I still only had twelve followers, though. That was one three-hundredth of what Hinami had.

"Anyway…you really surprised me the other day. I know I told you to take an active role in the school festival, but I was not expecting the play to be based on Kikuchi-san's story."

She seemed very pleased by the enthusiasm of her disciple.

"That was something I wanted to do, even if you didn't give that assignment to me."

"…Is that so?" Hinami said, frowning. "Well, never mind. As long as you're approaching your goal, it doesn't matter how you get there."

"Right."

I nodded, but something bothered me. She was right that the ends justified the means in this case, and I was used to Hinami sticking her nose in my business based on that philosophy.

But the same question occurred to me again.

Why did she want me to reach my goals so badly?

In the beginning, I felt like she'd just been following the momentum of our relationship as nanashi and NO NAME, but why was she taking it this far? Why was it such a big deal?

What did it mean to her?

"Hey, Hinami?"

"…What?"

She sounded slightly wary—she must have caught the shift in

my feelings. Nothing got past her.

"This is kind of a basic question, but I've been wondering."

"Yes?"

"Why do you want to turn me into a normie so badly?"

She looked at me suspiciously. "Why do you suddenly want to know?"

"I just do…"

"…You don't remember?" she asked me with surprise.

"Remember what?"

She answered quietly. "When nanashi and NO NAME first met. Do you remember what you said that made me take you to my house?"

"…Uh…"

Hinami sighed softly. "You said: *'You can't change characters in real life.' 'Your character is just better than mine.'*"

"Oh yeah," I said as the conversation started coming back. "I did say that."

Thanks to her, I'd closed a lot of that distance—I'd almost switched characters entirely, in a sense. So…I might have been wrong.

"Mm-hmm. When I heard you say that, I wanted to prove I was right."

"…Really?"

I understood what she was trying to say, but I still wasn't quite convinced. She was the queen of efficiency, so spending so much time on that one goal didn't seem to fit.

"What? You don't seem convinced."

"It's nothing."

As usual, she saw through me in a second. "I hate losing. Remember?"

"Well, that's true."

I think she meant she didn't want to lose in the clash of ideas about the game of life, especially since she was going up against nanashi. If that was true, then she was even more competitive than I'd given her credit for. But I still felt like there must be another reason.

"Anyway, none of that matters. Let's talk about you—did you choose anyone yet?"

"You mean…what we were talking about before?"

Had I chosen a girl to pursue, after taking a look at my own

feelings?

"Yes. Who you want to date. Since you said you wanted time to think, I gave you a whole week. I expect you've done plenty of thinking since then?"

I flinched as she bore down on me with her questions.

"Yeah…I have." I nodded.

I still hadn't solidified my decision and resolve in the way I'd have liked. But over the past few days, I had thought about what I wanted to do.

"Okay. Well, we decided on one full week, and I don't want to hurry you, but I do want to be sure we're on the same page. By tomorrow morning, please tell me the names of the *two* girls you want to get closer to."

"O-okay."

She really emphasized the word *two*. I guess that's a requirement, then.

"Today is the last day of your photo quest. Keep your nose to the grindstone!"

"This again…"

And so my last photo quest began.

* * *

"Braiiiiiin!!"

An energetic voice greeted me when I got to our classroom, despite the early hour. Crap. Mimimi Attack 2.0 was coming. But now that I knew, I should be able to avoid it!

"Oof!"

"Nice try."

"Ow!"

I had dodged right into her attack, and pain exploded across my shoulders.

When I glanced over at her, she was giggling. "You're still too slow!"

"Why are you even attacking me to start with?!"

"Good question!" she admitted with a smile. "But anyway, I have a favor to ask. I'm in need of some snappy comebacks!"

"Wh-what?" I had a bad feeling about this, but I waited for her to go on.

“Sooo…the track team is talking about doing a comedy routine for the school festival…”

“Uh-huh…” The bad feeling turned into a certainty.

“I’m planning to play the funny girl, but Tama didn’t want to be my partner.”

“Well, she *is* on the volleyball team, after all…”

“I’ve already gotten permission for the straight man to be someone who doesn’t run track! No one on our team wants to do it!”

“O-oh…”

This was getting painful. But I still didn’t want to be in a comedy routine. Plus, wouldn’t that be hard for an amateur like me?

“That’s why I’m asking you to do it!”

“Uh-huh.”

I wanted to bury my head in my hands. Mimimi was talking about all this in a very loud voice, so Hinami could definitely hear our conversation.

Which meant she would not be happy if I said no. *Damn it!*

“I—I guess it’s fine…”

“No, I really want you to— What?!”

“Hey, don’t be so surprised that I said yes!”

“But I didn’t even have to convince you!” She stuck her nose in the air. “So you’re hooked, huh? Can’t resist playing old married couple with me, can ya?”

“Uh, not exactly…”

“Ouch!”

She pressed her hands to her chest. Man, she had so much energy. *Can you not press your chest like that? I don’t know where to look.*

Was this really going to work? I’d said okay since one of my assignments was to participate actively in the festival, but comedy would be a real challenge.

“Do you think we have enough time to practice? We have to work on the class play, too…”

“We’ll manage! Just leave it to me!”

“Um…”

This was not good. I definitely could not leave it to her.

“So should we talk about it more later or something?” I said. I’d probably have to come up with an idea. *Hmm. What to do?*

“Good idea! Then it’s a date!”

“O-okay.”

“Okay!”

With that, she hopped over to Tama-chan and hugged her from behind. What the heck? Was she some kind of migratory bird?

Wait a second, I’d just casually accepted a role in a comedy routine. Now I was on the organizing committee, helping Kikuchi-san with the class play, *and* doing a skit with Mimimi. *What’s going on? Why am I taking on so many responsibilities? I am in* way *over my head.*

* * *

After school, the whole class had a discussion about the play.

The committee chair, Izumi; the usual note-taker, Seno-san; the playwright, Kikuchi-san; and I, the initiator, were all standing in front of the blackboard. Since there were fewer people up here this time, there was more attention on each of us. If that made me this nervous, I couldn’t even imagine how Kikuchi-san must be feeling after getting tossed into this so suddenly.

“Okay, let’s do the casting!”

Izumi was getting used to her role as leader; her voice sounded a lot more casual than last time. Seno-san wrote *Roles* on the blackboard.

“Has everyone read the summary we handed out earlier?” Izumi asked.

Some yeses came back from the class. Kikuchi-san had made some small changes to the document we reviewed at the café, printed out copies for everyone, and handed them out.

Izumi turned her gaze over to her. “So…am I right that the main characters are Alucia, Libra, and Kris?”

“…Uh, um…”

“Yeah, those three are the main characters.”

Kikuchi-san sounded pretty flustered by the sudden question, so I did my best to slide in and back her up.

“Okay! Let’s assign those roles first!” Izumi said cheerfully.

Kikuchi-san looked up at me apologetically. *No worries, Kikuchi-san! From here on out, this is my job. I’m using all the skills I’ve got to get what I want, and what I want is for your play to be a success.*

Seno-san wrote *Alucia*, *Libra*, and *Kris* on the board.

"So, um, how do we decide who plays who?" Izumi asked me, sounding slightly worried. We'd shared the manuscript over LINE the day before, but it was unlikely everyone had read it in a single day. Assigning roles wouldn't be easy.

"How about the people who've read it go by the full manuscript, those who haven't go by the summary, and we all try to figure out who seems like they'd fit the roles?" I said.

"Yeah, that sounds good! Let's start with Alucia!" Izumi looked at Kikuchi-san again. "…By the way, do you have an image of the character in your mind?"

"Um…of Alucia?"

Alucia was the princess directly in line to be queen, and the childhood friend of the locksmith's son, Libra.

I could tell Kikuchi-san was struggling under the whole class's attention, but she seemed calmer than before. I couldn't answer this one for her, so she'd have to do the best she could on her own.

"She's an outstanding student, and a quick thinker…and her words have a lot of power."

Everyone tried to think of someone who matched that description, and of course, all eyes gravitated to one person. No surprises there.

"Well, if we need a powerful speaker…," the jock Tachibana said. He didn't need to finish his sentence.

The person in question smiled under literally every eye in the class, raised her hand, and assumed a comically authoritative tone. "Then…it's gotta be me!"

The class laughed at her exaggerated confidence. Amazing how she could wring a laugh out of the slightest nuance of tone or words. If she messed it up at all, the silence afterward would be incredibly awkward, but she never made a mistake. Her words truly did hold power.

"Yes…I think this one definitely has to go to Aoi!" Izumi announced happily, and Hinami gave a conciliatory smile.

It was true, though. When I thought about the scene where Alucia had to bluff in front of the king himself to save Libra, the role did seem perfect for Hinami. Good choice.

"But won't you be double-booked with your work as student council president? Will you be okay?" Izumi asked worriedly.

Hinami reflected for a moment. "I might not be able to come to

all the rehearsals, but if we have an understudy for those times, it should be okay. As long as I have a copy of the script, I can pull it off!" she said confidently.

Her words really were powerful. She had convinced everyone she could do it, so no one contested the decision. And I had no doubt she would excel at the acting.

"Okay then, thank you! Unless anyone else wants that part, we'll go with Hinami!" said Izumi.

No one raised their hand, so the role of Alucia easily went to Hinami. That left Libra and Kris.

"Okay, next… How do you imagine Libra?" Izumi asked Kikuchi-san.

Libra. He was the son of the locksmith, a young commoner. He was sentenced to death for opening the forbidden door to the garden where the flying dragon was kept, but Alucia saved him by claiming he was her brother.

Kikuchi-san must have been waiting for the question, because she didn't panic this time.

"Libra… He's very curious, and good at getting close to people…"

"Hey, that sounds like me!" Takei said, before she'd finished talking. *Stop, dude.* He did match the specific traits she'd just listed, but come on. *Just stop.*

"And he's smart…"

"Oh, never mind…"

But as she continued, he dejectedly pulled back. *Well done, Takei. You do know yourself.*

"I think those are the basics."

Apparently, no one in the class matched that description very well, because we didn't gravitate to any one person like we had with Hinami. I couldn't think of the perfect person for the role, either.

We had to nominate people for the role or get volunteers.

The nominees were Mizusawa, the basketball player Tachibana, and Yanagisawa, a jock I didn't know. Takei volunteered, too. *Well, that was a rapid recovery, Takei. But I don't like your chances.*

"All right, let's choose which of these people would be the best Libra," Izumi said before taking a vote.

Honestly, I didn't think any of them was a perfect choice, but I voted for Tachibana, who I felt was the closest fit based on our few,

very brief conversations. I could have voted for Mizusawa, but he was too smooth, too much of a flirt to play Libra. Libra would never go out and hit on girls.

But since voting was based mostly on popularity, Mizusawa won with twenty-four votes. Thanks to the girls, he won in a landslide. *Damn, this guy…*

"Well, I've gotta say, I'm not sure this role is for me, but if you want me to play it that bad, you can count on me!"

He acted like he was being passive while letting everyone know he would do well, so he came off as super reliable. Was this another facet of the Mizusawa Method…?

Anyway, I think it turned out for the best. He was extremely versatile, not to mention his amazing speeches during the student council election, and I knew he'd do a good job with the acting. He probably was a good choice.

Now that we were assigning roles, this was all starting to feel real. Very exciting. Kikuchi-san's story really was going to be made into the class play.

And the main roles had gone to Hinami and Mizusawa, who were both good-looking and reliable actors. I bet this would go over well with the other classes.

"Next is Kris. What's your image of her?"

Kris. The orphan girl who was shut away from the world in the palace garden to raise the flying dragons.

Kikuchi-san thought for a moment before answering.

"Kris is timid, but honest and innocent. A bit childlike…I would say." She must have been getting more and more used to her role, because she hardly sounded nervous at all now.

Our classmates thought about who would fit the role and started calling out names.

Izumi, Mimimi, Tama-chan, and a friend of Hinami's named Uehara-san were nominated. No one volunteered. It's hard to volunteer for an "innocent" role, I guess. By the way, I thought Tama-chan would turn down her nomination right away, but she accepted it without protest. So she wouldn't mind being chosen?

Izumi looked a bit flustered. "I-I'm on the list…? Well, okay, let's choose the person for this role."

She took a vote, and Tama-chan won with fifteen votes. Izumi got eleven, so it was a fairly close race.

"Huh? Me?" Tama-chan said, sounding surprised. Everyone was

looking at her with congratulatory smiles. Their eyes didn't show the slightest hint of hostility or aggression.

Actually, it was amazing she won. She *was* the perfect person for an "honest, innocent, and slightly childlike" role, but our classmates didn't used to like that about her before—just look at the whole mess with Konno. And now here she was with the most votes, leaving her mentor in the dust. I must say I was very pleased.

So the main characters had been cast.

Mizusawa was playing Libra, the locksmith's son.

Hinami was playing Libra's childhood friend Alucia, the strong-willed princess in line for the throne.

Tama-chan was playing Kris, the orphan girl shut away in the palace garden to care for the flying dragons.

The casting had actually turned out really well. Tama-chan's acting ability was an unknown, but she was similar enough to her character that I didn't see any red flags.

After that, we cast the smaller roles, and even though each decision involved a mix of nominations and volunteers, the choices generally seemed like good fits.

But when it came time to cast Rei, a female knight of the castle, we had a minor incident.

Kikuchi-san described the character like this: "Her will is strong, and so is her skill with the sword. Also, she takes good care of those below her."

The description already brought a certain person to mind, but the decisive factor was the description written on the summary sheet.

"The captain of the castle's female equestrian guard. She monitors the actions of Libra, Alucia, and Kris as the castle rules demand, but when it matters most, she takes their side. She is tall, with long blond hair and a sharp gaze.*"*

Ever since the role of Alucia went to Hinami, everyone had been interested in a certain other member of the class.

That person was twirling her bleached hair around her fingertip and looking out at the class with a slightly surprised expression.

Izumi brought her hands together in a gesture of pleading and addressed her. "Please, Erika! Can you take this one?"

Erika Konno sighed with irritation.

The strong-willed girl who had long blond hair, a sharp gaze, and took care of those below her—that was absolutely Konno.

"Whatever, I guess…" She sighed, accepting the role with surprising ease. Huh. I thought she'd get all grumpy and turn it down, but she was going to do it. I wondered if it was because her friend Izumi had asked her, or if she had a hidden love for the theater. Well, whatever the reason, the role suited her perfectly, so it was a good thing for the play.

"Is that it? Then let's have a round of applause for the cast!" Izumi said, fully comfortable in her role now, and we all complied.

Kikuchi-san stared at the blackboard like it was a miracle, clapping softly with her dainty little hands. Her spirit seemed to be floating in the air.

Of course it was.

Right now, at this very moment, the fantasy she'd dreamed up and written down as a story had happened to end up in my hands, and now it was being performed as the class play.

I knew that feeling.

You take a single step forward, and suddenly, the whole world spreads out before you.

Kikuchi-san must have been wholly immersed in that experience right then.

Just imagining it made my heart pound. I was glad I suggested her story to the class, even if it pulled us out of our comfort zones.

* * *

After the class meeting, I went with Kikuchi-san to the library.

She was going to spend the next few days writing a script for the class to use, and I'd come to the library to talk it over with her. I had to do something about my last photo quest, the shot of Izumi eating ice cream, but I assumed Izumi would be staying late at school. I'd try to figure something out on the way home. I couldn't abandon Kikuchi-san just for an assignment.

"Great job today, Kikuchi-san."

She must have been reeling from how new the whole experience was. I knew more than anyone the emotional toll of being plunged into something so intense, so the words really came

from my heart.

“Thank you… I’m a little tired.”

Kikuchi-san giggled, and her smile was fresh and bright. She was tired, but I think it was the good kind of tired.

“Don’t you think the casting went well?”

“…Yes. The actors matched my image perfectly,” she said, smiling softly.

“But now you’ve got to write the script…”

“Th-that’s true…”

She tensed up a bit as I shifted into a getting-down-to-business tone, and she pressed her lips together with determination for the job ahead. I’d learned that tone from Hinami in our meetings.

“You’re still not sure how to end it, right?”

“…Right.”

That was going to be the biggest challenge.

“So you’ll be able to adapt the rest directly from the story…but now you have to figure out the climax.”

I’d checked with Izumi about how long the play could be, and she said up to twenty minutes. That was about the same length as an anime or drama on TV if you left out the opening and closing credits and commercials, which was probably a good way to imagine it.

Since it was a short story to start with, she shouldn’t have to cut too much to make it into a play.

But the ending would be all the more important.

“What are you unsure about, specifically?” I asked her.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure I could come up with a good suggestion even if she told me what the problem was. But I was hoping talking it out might help her think of something on her own.

“…Well…,” she began, still thinking. “The part I’m most unsure about is, when Libra gets together with Kris or Alucia…what should happen to the other one?”

“Oh…yeah, I see the problem.”

That probably would be one of the things the audience remembered most. Even though romance wasn’t the core of the story, whenever love was involved, people tended to focus on that. And they would probably feel for whichever character didn’t end up with Libra.

It was a small detail, but it would change people’s overall impression of the story. At least, in the opinion of a novice like me.

“Um…have you already decided who Libra will end up with?”

“No, I’m still not sure. Maybe…I’m afraid to decide.” She sighed.

“Oh, okay…”

She’d said the same thing before—she’d come to love these characters, so she was especially wary of ruining the story.

“I’m afraid to decide the fate of all three characters at once.” She lowered her head. “I think I’ve been unsure of this part ever since I came up with the story.”

“Oh…”

This was going to be tough to solve.

She was afraid to pair Libra with Kris or Alucia, but that didn’t mean she wanted him to be with neither of them. She knew she had to choose one or the other, but she was afraid to make the decision.

There was no right answer to this problem.

“Well, then…”

But maybe not having a right answer would make it easier to solve.

I wanted to give her a way to find the answer. I wasn’t sure if my suggestion would help, but I wanted to tell her my general approach to these things. When you have a question with no right answer, there’s only one standard for deciding problems like that.

“If you were Libra, who do you think you would choose?”

That was it.

The world is full of problems with no right answer. In the end, those problems are always decided based on individual preferences—some hazy notion of what would be more fun. That was the underlying reason why I played *Atafami*, too.

If that was true for me, then the easiest way for Kikuchi-san to choose, and the way that was least likely to leave her with regrets, would be for her to decide based on her own preferences—on what she wanted.

But she shook her head. “No, I don’t think that would work.”

“…Why not?”

When she answered, she sounded somehow lonely. “I may have an idea of what I’d like to do in his place.”

“Yeah?”

“But I need to think about what would be best for the story. What path for the characters would be ideal for that world? That’s why I’m having trouble deciding.”

“What would be ideal for that world…”

To tell the truth, I probably only understood about half of what she was saying. But I did know that in her own way, she was trying to face her creation head-on.

“I feel like bringing my personal feelings into it would somehow lack integrity…”

“Hmm…”

She’d clearly put a lot of thought into this, and it wasn’t like I had some deep philosophy that I could argue for. Was there anything else I could say?

As I puzzled over the answer, Kikuchi-san took a deep breath.

“Um, Tomozaki-kun?”

“Yeah?” I answered, my guard completely down.

She looked me straight in the eye.

“Do you like anyone right now?”

A weird, choking sort of noise escaped my mouth.

“M-m-m-m-me?”

Kikuchi-san was staring at me with a red but very serious face. “Yes… You.”

Our eyes met. Hers were as pure as a child’s, twinkling with an innocence that seemed to purify everything it took in.

“I—I… I’m not sure.”

I couldn’t tell her I was supposed to be thinking about exactly that question right now, so I just mumbled a vague reply. I couldn’t just say the name that rose to my mind.

“Oh,” she muttered, sounding a little deflated. Then she turned her impassioned eyes on me again.

“Well, just imagine, then. Imagine you cared about more than one person…”

“…Uh-huh…”

Her petite, beautifully shaped lips had so much power behind them, slight as the movements were.

“And if you were only able to choose one of them…”

It wasn’t truly magic; it was the simple power of words.

“…who would you choose?”

I couldn't help being startled.

Her question was gently stirring up everything that had settled at the bottom of my heart.

It was as if she was asking me to look closely at what was rising up inside me.

For a moment, I couldn't speak, and I felt an emotion I'd never really experienced before bubbling up.

Her question was hard for me to answer right then.

"Well, to tell you the truth…"

She was asking me with total sincerity.

Kikuchi-san was a shy girl. Just asking a guy her age a question about love probably took a huge amount of energy.

It wouldn't be right to answer with a lie, or a theoretical ideal, or a front, or a future goal. I had to tell her what I was thinking and feeling now, as I was.

So I took responsibility and dived down deep inside my heart to see what my real emotions were—and there, I found something I'd been trying not to see for some time.

It was the answer to Kikuchi-san's question—and also, I think, to Hinami's assignment. Embarrassing as it was, this was what I'd found.

"I don't feel like I have the right to choose another person."

There it was. Once I'd said the words, I was certain of how true they were.

"…Um…" Kikuchi-san seemed confused.

Hinami had asked me over and over who I was going to choose. She'd even made me imagine what I'd do if different girls told me they liked me.

Here was the underlying reason I'd put off answering.

Of course, I didn't want to be insincere and pick someone without knowing my own emotions, but there was a bigger reason.

It was the seventeen years I'd spent convinced I deserved to be at the bottom.

I wasn't worthy of being chosen, let alone choosing someone else. If I had to say, I was more like a harmless rock lying by the side of the road. Nothing more, nothing less.

I could never choose someone else, much less take

responsibility for involving myself in someone else's life. In fact, I shouldn't.

I could only handle the responsibilities of my own life—that belief was a solid conviction, founded on my own weakness.

When Hinami had asked me to imagine girls saying they liked me, I was embarrassed by the vivid picture of such a scenario, but the most powerful force on my heart was the inexpressible guilt of imposing myself on other people. The imaginary voice jeering at me for having the audacity to choose another person when I was so pathetic. The underlying sense of incompetence that controlled all my thoughts about the game of life I was playing.

And it had nested deep in my heart.

For a moment, Kikuchi-san couldn't find a reply.

"…So that's how you feel," she finally said.

I wasn't sure how much of my thoughts she'd guessed, but she nodded gently.

"Yeah. So honestly, that kind of stuff is hard for me to talk about… I'm sorry."

I could hear how lifeless my own voice sounded, but I couldn't hide it now. It was like some switch had been flipped, and all the dark parts of me were spilling out uncontrollably.

"…I understand."

We were both silent for a little while, and it was suffocating. I'd never felt like that with Kikuchi-san before.

I'd let her see the worst of me.

"…Yeah, I'm sorry."

I felt awful, and I at least wanted to apologize for that.

With that, Kikuchi-san and I left the library.

* * *

When I went back to the classroom to get my bag, Mimimi, Izumi, and Nakamura's group were still there, along with a few other people. They were making signs and menus for the manga café.

"Yo, Farm Boy!"

"Hey."

I managed to make my voice sound somewhat normal as I answered Takei's greeting and joined up with the group.

“Hey, it’s the director.”

“Pfft, you mean me? I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

I managed to joke around a little with Mizusawa, too. I was so used to this kind of banter that I could at least fake it even when I felt crappy.

But for some reason, Mizusawa gave me a suspicious look. “Fumiya?”

“Yeah, what?” I said, no awkward pause or anything.

He glanced around the group, and I did the same. Everyone was working on their projects. After another pensive pause, he said, “No, never mind.”

“Huh?” I asked.

He smiled slightly and nodded. “Hey, I heard from Gumi. She said she’s coming to our festival.”

“Oh, really? She is?”

We shifted into chat mode. Something felt slightly off, but maybe I was imagining it.

As we talked, I heard Mimimi heckling us from behind. “Hey, who are you talking about?!”

“None of your business.”

“You’re so mean, Takahiro!”

“Wanna get going?” Mizusawa said casually, and everyone took his lead. A few minutes later, we all left school.

When we got to the station, we scattered in various directions to head home.

I kept up my normal outer appearance, joining in the conversation so no one would guess how weirdly depressed I felt.

But when I was in this funk, my brain couldn’t handle the extra task of figuring out how to take a picture of Izumi eating ice cream, my final photo quest, so I ended up saying good-bye without making a move.

Mimimi and I got off at Kitayono Station.

“We finally made it!” she said.

“Uh, it was only one stop from Omiya…”

“You could also say that!”

“Um, I think you could only say that…”

We walked along side by side, joking around as usual.

“By the way, Mr. Tomozaki!!”

“Wh-what?”

Mimimi made her hand into a microphone like she was interviewing me. Usually, when she did that, it meant she was about to drop a bomb of a question. I braced for impact.

"Who is this mysterious Gumi-chan?"

"…Um, uh…"

But her question turned out to be fairly silly. I was expecting something that cut a bit deeper, so I was almost disappointed.

"Hmm, a lackluster reaction."

"Uh, well… She's just a girl who works with Mizusawa and me."

"I-is that really all? Sounds suspicious."

"Yeah, surprisingly, that's really all…"

Mimimi usually had a very sharp sense for the subtleties of relationships, but this time, her guess missed the mark. Huh. Actually, that was a good thing. I'd be in trouble if she always saw right through me.

"But it sounds like you went to her school festival?"

"Yeah, because I was invited."

Who did she hear that from? Maybe Mizusawa mentioned it like it was no big deal? Not that there was anything to hide, of course.

"You *are* acting suspicious! And I heard she goes to a girls' school!"

"Why does that matter?"

Okay, I admit, going into a girls' school is akin to illegally crossing a national border.

Now Mimimi was acting sullen. Why? "It's just…you don't seem like the type to hang out at girls' schools."

"Hey, do you really think they'd arrest *me* for showing up at a girls' school? Plus, Mizusawa got a proper invitation."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel better…" She pouted even more. What?

"What do you mean?"

"…Nothing!"

She glared at me fiercely. *Wh-why are you getting mad?*

Then she gave a loud sigh. "Tomozaki, you're really cool sometimes, but when you're not, you're really, really not."

"I—I am? I mean, there are times when I'm cool?" I asked in all seriousness.

She glared at me harder. "Yes! You helped me out a lot, and

you worked really hard to help Tama, too!"

"O-oh. Right. Sorry." Now that she was borderline hostile, I couldn't help apologizing. I think I might have said the wrong thing.

The next sigh was even louder. Lots of sighs today. Probably all of them my fault.

"You don't need to apologize for that."

"Oh, okay."

"I respect my Brain, you know."

"Huh?" I said. That was unexpected. "You respect me?"

Her eyes met mine. "Yes, I do. Is that weird?"

"N-no, not *weird*, exactly, but…I feel bad, or…"

I was struggling to convey my emotions.

Mimimi ran her finger over the hand-sewn seam on the charm attached to her bag. "Do you remember when I told you you're like Tama?"

"…Yeah."

I nodded. Mimimi and Hinami had both said that to me. And after going through the Konno ordeal with her, I had to agree that the foundation of my way of thinking was similar to hers.

"You're both scaredy-cats, but when you make up your mind to do something, you do it. You head straight for what you want. It's everything I want to be but can't. I think you two are amazing."

Her words reminded me of what Izumi had said to me a while back.

"…Oh."

Mimimi was a different kind of person from Tama-chan and me. She could do anything. She was great at adapting to her surroundings, while Tama-chan and I were terrible at it. But in exchange, you could say we had more confidence about saying what we thought and sticking to it.

Just as I couldn't do what Mimimi did, maybe she couldn't do what Tama-chan and I did. Even if she wanted to.

I was trying to figure out how to reply when she stopped walking one step ahead of me and grinned.

"That's what I like about you."

"Uh…"

I was at a loss for words. *Um, what did she just say?*

I stared at her face as my brain completely stalled.

She opened her mouth wide and laughed. "…Ha-ha! You

thought I meant I liked you like *that*, didn't you?!"

"N-no, I didn't…!"

Oh, come on! Bottom-tier characters are always jumping to conclusions about this stuff, so at least be a little careful! People talk about how they can't use a heart emoji on LINE without sending the wrong message, but it takes way less than that to confuse me! I haven't gotten a single heart emoji in my life; dealing with this face-to-face is way too much for me.

As I scrambled to cover up my mistake, Mimimi smiled teasingly.

"Actually, I do like you like that."

"What?"

"Bye!"

She ran off ahead of me and turned the corner where we usually split up. *Wait, my brain hasn't caught up yet! Huh? What?*

5

If you don't make up your mind, the story won't advance

After Mimimi was gone, I shuffled along the side of the road like a typical bottom-tier character, mulling it all over. What in the world did Mimimi mean by what she just said?

"You thought I meant I liked you like that*, didn't you?!"* plus "Actually*, I do like you like that"* equals…what?

The extremely simple formula in my mind was trying desperately to produce a certain answer.

But that possibility didn't gel with who I was. If I redid the equation based on that premise, I got an internal contradiction, which produced an error message that finally broke my mental calculator.

I wanted to get someone A-tier to do the math for me…which probably meant I should call Hinami.

But I felt like if I asked her and she came up with the same answer that I did, we'd have different ideas about what I should do. She'd probably try to make me use it to my advantage somehow.

I didn't want to do that, and I didn't want to hear Hinami suggest it.

Just as I was considering it all, my phone buzzed. I took it out and looked at the screen. There was a message from Mizusawa.

[*Can you come to Omiya right now?*]

I didn't know why Mizusawa was suddenly asking me to meet him, but his timing was perfect. Kitayono was only one stop from Omiya, and my commuter ticket would cover the distance, so I didn't even have to worry about paying.

Plus, I wouldn't make any progress on this trying to make sense

of it myself.

I slung my bag over my shoulder again and headed for the station.

* * *

I was sitting in Starbucks. I hadn't been to a normie spot like this in a while.

Mizusawa was sitting directly across from me, looking at his phone and sipping a soy latte or something.

Apparently, he'd gone to the arcade with Nakamura and Takei, and they'd just split up.

"Uh…so what's up? Why'd you ask me to meet you?" I asked him.

"I think the real question is, what's up with you?"

"…Huh?"

I didn't know what to make of his question-answer. He was the one who'd asked me to meet him at the drop of a hat. I'd just gone along with it.

"Don't play dumb. Did something happen after school, or am I wrong?"

The certainty of his tone startled me. What did he know?

I panicked and snapped my mouth shut.

"Did you get turned down? Maybe 'cause you told her you liked her too soon?"

"N-no."

Those words—*told her you liked her*—sent me into an even bigger panic. Was it possible? The thing with Mimimi had only happened fifteen or twenty minutes earlier. Had he already heard about it? Man, if so, he had good informants.

"Or maybe the reverse? She told you she likes you, and you turned her down?"

"Wait a second, how do you know all this?" I asked in shock.

Mizusawa laughed, sounding very amused. "So I was right. I told you—I see you, man."

"S-seriously…?"

He had to have a network. But still, how did he know about Mimimi? I hadn't told anyone—had she?

"Did someone tell you?" I asked.

His answer was terrifying.

"No, but *when you came back from the library earlier*, something was definitely up with you."

The blood drained from my head.

"…From the library? Not just now?" I asked timidly.

He peered at me, puzzled.

I think I just made a huge mistake. "Uh, um, never mind…!"

I hurriedly tried to cover it up, but Mizusawa sat there thinking for several seconds with a very cool expression. Then he smiled, as if he'd just made an especially intriguing discovery.

"So that means…someone confessed to you after the library incident!"

He arrived at the truth with no trouble whatsoever.

I kept calm and said nothing, but before his sharp gaze, I might as well have been sitting there naked.

"So it's Mimimi?"

If he could figure me out that completely, I was totally helpless. "No, uh…how did you know?"

"Ha-ha-ha, I had no idea, but thanks for telling me."

"Oof…"

How could I have left myself so open to attack?

"So what's the story? Mimimi really confessed to you?" he asked eagerly.

At this point, I was probably best off going all in and asking for a normie perspective on what I should do. Stewing over it alone definitely seemed like a bad idea.

"Uh, I'm not sure if she confessed, but she said *something*," I admitted.

Mizusawa cackled. "Wow, what a stroke of luck. All I did was ask a leading question because I thought something happened when you were in the library with Kikuchi-san, and now here we are."

"That's some misunderstanding…"

He was asking me about something else, and I went and told him everything. What the hell? But I was glad he was the one who found out. I didn't have to worry about him using the information against me.

"So tell me the whole story."

“Well, actually…”

Resigning myself to being pried open, I told him what had happened with Mimimi at Kitayono.

* * *

“Ah, interesting.”

He was kind enough to take everything I said seriously.

“I was thinking maybe she didn’t mean she likes me, but this is all so new to me. I’m really confused.”

“Hmm.”

He sipped his soy latte or whatever and peered at me over the rim. “What are you unsure about?” he asked very directly.

I thought about what answer would get the most wisdom from this top-tier character from another dimension.

“I want to know what’s going on. I’m not even sure she was telling me she liked me…”

Mizusawa scratched his cheek lightly. “It’s a tough call. She might like you, or it might be a tactical move.”

“A t-tactical move…?” I flinched. So that was a possibility? This was getting really next-level.

“Yeah. You know how some girls say they like you just to get your attention, right?”

“Uh, I’ve heard rumors…”

That kind of thing comes up occasionally in TV shows and manga.

“She didn’t say it after you started dating, so it’s not like you absolutely have to give her an answer. If you want to go along like you have up to this point, you can totally do that.”

“I—I can…?”

That seemed insincere somehow, but he’d probably just tell me I read too much manga.

“I can say one thing, though, and it’s that if you wanted to date Mimimi right now, you probably could.”

“What?!” I blurted out loudly enough to startle the people sitting near us.

“Keep it down, geez!” Mizusawa said with a smirk.

“S-sorry.”

“No worries,” he said, smiling again. “But I could see how the

situation would light a fire under her butt."

Once again, he was starting to lose me. "Under *her* butt?"

"Huh? Yeah, obviously."

"…Why?"

What could have made her feel like that? I had no idea what he was getting at.

He sighed. "You really are clueless about this stuff."

"S-sorry. Can you explain, please…?" I asked humbly.

"I told you. Attractive guys attract people," he said simply.

"…Huh?"

This new clue did nothing whatsoever to enlighten me.

"I'm guessing she got worried that Kikuchi-san or one of the girls at Gumi's school would snap you up."

"N-now I'm really lost…"

He looked at me with a fairly serious expression. "I think you're not." There was something joking in his tone, but also a hint of rebuke.

Like he thought I was pretending not to see the truth.

"You've got a bad habit of using your weakness as an excuse. You don't want to deal with other people's expectations and feelings for you."

Now I was guilty and confused. "B-but if someone snapped me up, there's plenty of other guys—"

"Listen to me," Mizusawa interrupted with quiet force, and my pathetic mumbling stopped. His sharp gaze locked with mine. "I've asked you this before. When are you going to stop the masochistic shit?"

"…Uh…"

I remembered then. Mizusawa and Mimimi had both told me that I should stop putting myself down. Right afterward, I'd tried to cut down on it, but lately, I may have gone back to my old habits.

"Maybe you really haven't noticed this."

Mizusawa's piercing eyes didn't stray from me for a second, probing all the darkness settled at the bottom of my heart.

"When you put yourself down—you seem almost relieved."

It felt like a punch in the face.

"You didn't realize that, did you?"

"…No," I said in a daze.

Relieved? Was that how I felt?

But when I really thought hard, I could see it, deep inside me.

"You're good at games, right? So you should understand this. If you give yourself a security blanket and make everything safe and easy, you're not going to get any better."

"Um, I…"

I understood so well that it hurt. So well that it stung.

To reduce the pain of losing, you make up excuses before the fight even begins. Losing becomes less scary, and you don't have to put in the effort to improve. You can feel safe without really fighting. Eventually, you get to feel that relief whether you win or not.

But you'll never become a better player.

"Stop lowering the bar so you feel safe. The real cool guys are the ones who grow to reach the higher bar they set for themselves," Mizuswa said confidently. He had the goods to show for it. "And another thing I don't know if you've considered."

"…Yeah?" I barely managed to say.

"If someone does like you—"

"But—"

"Just shut up for a minute."

Before I could reflexively deny the very possibility, he smoothly shot me down.

"S-sorry."

His expression didn't change. "Honestly, I personally couldn't care less if you put yourself down. But…"

Once again, I heard that rebuke in his tone.

"…when you do, you hurt the person who likes you."

His words cut deep, and for a moment, I couldn't find a reply.

"…Oh," I finally mumbled.

Mizusawa sighed and looked away from me. Then he gave a huff of a laugh, like he was letting the air out of an overblown balloon.

"Just keep that in mind."

* * *

I was in my bedroom with the lights out, lying faceup on my bed and going through everything again.

A week earlier, Hinami had asked me who I liked, and I told her I wanted time to think about it. I thought that would be a way for me to face my true feelings.

But a few days later, Kikuchi-san had turned her all-seeing gaze on me and shown me the truth with her frank honesty.

And I'd realized what really lay at the bottom of my heart.

I hadn't put off choosing who I wanted to date because I needed to confront the truth.

I'd put off choosing because I was afraid to confront my own weakness.

And then when I talked to Mizusawa, I'd realized something else.

He came off as a player, but he'd clearly chosen one person—Hinami.

Meanwhile, I acted sincere on the surface, but in reality, I was running away from making a choice.

I used "sincerity" as a cover for abdicating responsibility.

I guess I'm an incurable bottom-tier character in the game of life after all.

This wasn't just about lacking skills or embarrassing myself.

I put myself down and avoided committing to a decision.

I let myself feel safe without fighting and used my own weakness as an excuse.

I told myself no one would choose me and let that be where it ended.

I ran from the truth.

Well, if that was the case…

If I wanted to take another step forward, then I had to face up to my own weakness.

I'd have to accept it and take another good look at my current reality.

Then maybe one day, I could carry the feelings of another

person with my own strength. Feelings I'd ignored. Feelings…for me.

Get off your high horse, loser.
You think you *could choose someone to be with?*
Don't be ridiculous.
Stop misinterpreting things. Don't be pathetic.
You're harmless. You're a stupid little rock.

All the voices in my heart wanted to drag me down, but I had to push them aside. I could still hear them, but I had to act like I didn't.

I had to pretend I was a top-tier character.

I had to put *it* into words.

The darkness was welling up inside me again, so I pushed it down and took a long, slow breath.

Some part of me had already sensed it.

The awkward way our eyes met. The strange feeling I got from the littlest interactions or conversations. Her shy expression, the blush on her face and mine.

It wasn't that I hadn't noticed—I'd just pretended I hadn't.

I wouldn't run away into my own weakness anymore. I wouldn't tell myself any more lies.

Damn it, I'd say my own truth out loud.

Okay. A girl…
…Minami Nanami…

…likes me.

Afterword

Hello again, Yuki Yaku here.

Publication of the *Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki* series began in May 2016, and this volume goes on sale in May 2018. That makes an even two years from the launch to the sixth volume.

They say time goes faster the older you get, but when I look back over the two years since my debut, saying *time went fast* sounds like an understatement—I feel like three or four years have passed, and I'm sure it's because of all the new things I've been lucky enough to try out during this time. From author events and television appearances to having the series turned into a manga and needing to meet regular deadlines, these two years have been full of new experiences.

Among those new experiences is the simultaneous release of the sixth volume of the book with the first volume of the manga, which is currently also being serialized in Gangan Joker. I'm very grateful for all this, and I hope my readers will check out the manga version, too. I also hope I'll be able to continue taking on new challenges so that future years feel just as long when I look back on them.

And as for those new challenges, I suppose I should start with the little things, like this afterword. In that sense, a certain topic naturally presents itself as the focus.

Yes: the angles of Gumi-chan's joints in the second full-color opening illustration, which depicts her making her hands into a pair of rabbit ears.

Now, I'm sure some of you are thinking—why this again? Was that line about "taking on new challenges" just a convenient segue? But I'll ask you to keep your comments to yourself. I've come this far, and one of these days, I'll be writing the final volume, so I plan to continue with my standard MO regardless of your censure or praise. Prepare yourself. I'll keep writing about what I like until the bitter end.

Anyhow, the first things I must note are the angles of her

shoulder, elbow, and fingers in the hand holding her cell phone.

Requests for opening illustrations of specific scenes are usually communicated to the illustrator once the manuscript has been firmed up to a certain degree. This time, when the editor and I sent in our illustration requests, we asked for a picture of Gumi-chan making rabbit ears with both hands, but of course, we didn't go so far as to specify the angle of her arms or anything like that.

All the same. The illustrator has reduced the angle of her arms to the bare minimum of what could be called "making rabbit ears," and, in doing so, subtly communicates her lazy personality so that readers will instinctively sense it.

Also, as you can see at a glance, Gumi-chan is sitting on the edge of her chair. Again, through the angle of her hip joints, readers are able to instinctively understand that while she has roused herself a bit at this particular moment, she was slouched against the back a second earlier.

It's not just her joints, either. The fact that she's making the rabbit ears while holding her phone deserves mention, too. That small detail communicates the fact that when she made this little pose for Tomozaki and Mizusawa, she didn't go to the trouble of putting her phone away but instead just made a slapdash gesture. Once again, Gumi-chan's personality comes through powerfully.

Add in her cute expression and the sloppy way she's got her legs crossed, and you have a drawing that perfectly illustrates the character.

When this series first started, I needed to share my images of the characters with the illustrator, Fly-san, whom I'd never met or even talked to. I sent him a mysterious note saying, *"I've emphasized the high-school-girl-ness of the characters in this series, so please create the same mood in the illustrations,"* which I think put him off a little. But this illustration really does vividly overflow with that "high-school-girl-ness" I requested.

In short, through the details in the illustrations—like the knot on Mimimi's gym clothes, the transparency of Kikuchi-san's school-uniform blouse, and the turquoise necklace that Yuzu wore, which became famous because I freaked out Fly-san a little by saying, *"Hey, that's turquoise, isn't it? I totally get that. Yuzu would definitely wear turquoise"*—he always draws out the essence of each character. And once again, when it came to depicting the typical contemporary high school girl Gumi-chan, he used simple, realistic

details like the lazy angle of her joints and the sloppy way she holds her cell phone to bring out her personality.

If Gumi-chan were a real girl, I'd tell her she should use this picture as the background image for her LINE home screen.

I hope I've managed to communicate my feelings on this subject.

Now on to the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, Fly-san, thank you for sticking with me through even my most detailed suggestions. Iwaasa-san and I always praise you to the skies. I'm a loyal fan.

To my editor, Iwaasa-san, I know I promised you after almost missing the deadline for the last volume that I'd do better this time, but once again, I barely made it. I promise I'll do better next time.

To my readers, thank you for all your support. I pretty much scour the Internet for my own work, so I've probably read most of your reviews. I'll do my best to further your reading enjoyment even more in the future, so I hope you'll keep up with the series. See you in the next volume.

Yuki Yaku

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